

# The DOCTOR WHO Companion

## ANNUAL 2026



# Welcome to the Doctor Who Companion Annual 2026

Welcome to the sixth annual from *The Doctor Who Companion*!

And we've got quite a whopper for you. At 99 pages, this is our biggest annual yet.

What a funny year it's been. We've had a full season of *Doctor Who*, but its ending, writing out Ncuti Gatwa's Fifteenth Doctor, seemed to satisfy no one. Does that detract from other strong stories with his Doctor like *Boom*, *73 Yards*, *Lux*, and *The Well*? No, it shouldn't. It does make the era feel like a missed opportunity, however. Now, we have 12 months to wait, to see how the cliffhanger is picked up, to see the shape of the show's potential future.

But the DWC isn't waiting 12 months to celebrate the festivities — so here it is, this year's annual, to tide you over, featuring: reviews of every episode of new *Doctor Who* screened in 2025; an exclusive extract from *Companions: More Than Sixty Years of Doctor Who Assistants* from Candy Jar Books; an interview with Baz Greenland, editor of the *Doctor Who Christmas Specials* book; a look back at *The Time Warrior*; Frank Danes mulling over a decade of the Bedford *Who* Charity Con; an extensive deconstruction of *Delta and the Bannermen*; and reviews of Big Finish's festive *Torchwood* tale, *Reflect*, the Paul Cornell-penned book, *The Mighty Avengers vs. the 1970s*, and two superb plays, *Inside No 9: Stage/Fright* and *Twelfth Night*.

Plus, there are three short stories to whet your appetite, starring the Ninth Doctor, the Third Doctor, and the Master...

Thank you for reading and sticking with the DWC this year. 2026 marks the site's tenth anniversary, which feels amazing — we'll be celebrating accordingly!

The best is yet to come, folks.

**Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!**

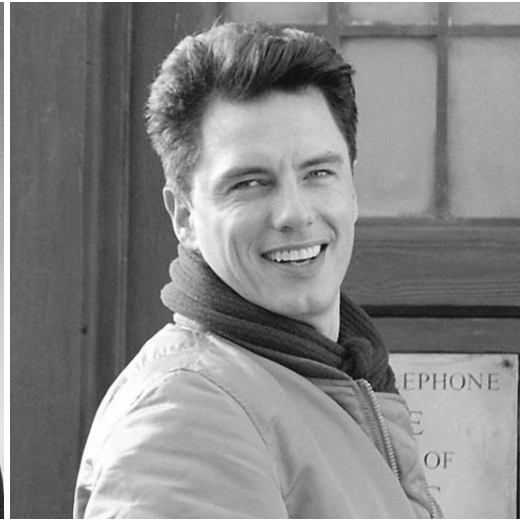
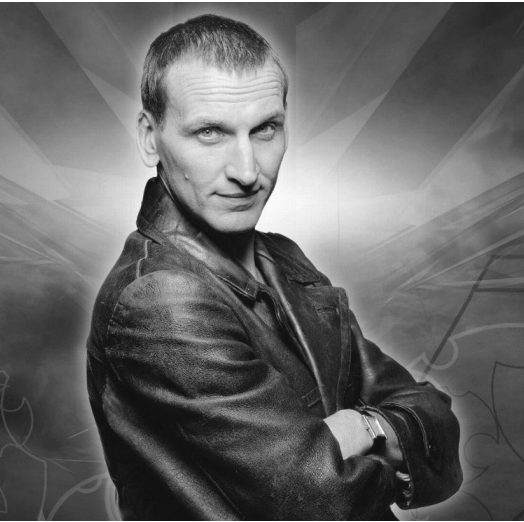
Philip Bates,

Editor and Co-Founder of *The Doctor Who Companion*.

**AND THANK YOU TO JAMES BALDOCK, FOR CREATING THE BRILLIANT  
FRONT AND BACK COVER ARTWORKS.**

# It Gets Earlier Every Year

James Baldock



SHIP'S LOG ENTRY HXXX01345535/@442

SUBJECT: TARDIS EXTERIOR LIFE SCAN COMPLETE

HGHTR FH\_\$\$\$£ £££££ RH\$\$

---- SYSTEM ERROR: CORRUPTED DATA ----

PARTIAL SUMMARY FOLLOWS

GALACTIC COORDINATES 359 DEG 56' 39.4" / -0 DEG 2 / 46.2"

LOCALISATION: EARTH, EUROPE, ENGLAND, SOMERSET

DATE: ??/??/????????

TIME: 00:00:00

WEATHER: CLOUDY

ATMOSPHERE: BREATHABLE

TRANSLATION CONFIGURED: OLD ENGLISH

CHAMELEON CIRCUIT: STILL NON-FUNCTIONING. ARSE BISCUITS

Of all the places to build a shed, Alwin thought to himself, why here?

He'd almost walked into it. Round the corner of a holly bush he came, two hares dangling from the hook on his belt, when something sprang at him from between the fir trees where the path was supposed to be. It really was most inconsiderate. Not to mention a horrible colour: deep, vivid blue, clashing horribly with the rest of the forest. Not even a very big shed; certainly large enough to hold only a handful of carcasses and perhaps a

small child, if you needed somewhere to put one.

He was sure it hadn't been there the day before. No doubt one of those build-it-yourself jobs, probably from one of the markets. The sort where you eye up the sample and then haul away planks of painted wood on your cart, with incomprehensible instructions in Latin, complete with tiny diagrams spattered with bird poo. Then you had to haul the whole lot back on the cart to ride back to market in time to collect the piece they'd forgotten to give you.

There was writing of some sort on the shed, forming words Alwin could not read and would not in any case be able to understand. And thus, being the sort of peripheral character who is narrow of focus, and who serves only to set the scene, we will leave him to his own devices.

Some distance away from the shed, three travellers strolled through the undergrowth. Sunlight filtered through trees largely stripped of dressing, that year's foliage a red and brown carpet that covered much of the forest. The ground snapped and crackled (but did not pop) beneath sturdy, anachronistic boots that were not of this world, much like the people who wore them.

To be specific, two of the people who wore them. Only one of the trio was Earth-born; the others were alien. Although they spent a lot of time on Earth: the weather was clement and, generally speaking, they liked the place. When they weren't being tortured, shot at, or tied up.

Actually, one of them quite enjoyed the tying up.

"Welcome to Brerebury!" said the Doctor. He picked a stray leaf that had landed in a crimp in his leather jacket. "Forest-dwelling habitat, population unknown. Famous for lumber export and several rare species of moth."

Captain Jack Harkness picked up the thread. "It's a philatelist's wet dream. Plus there's at least three kinds of badger, including one that supposedly talks - one word, just one, on a Tuesday once in a hundred years. Then there's the locals; Brerebury's got a long history of folks digging it up. Settlements dating back to the Bronze age and forward to the Fibreglass. They say the views from the summit would make a grown man weep. Plus, it's the only place in the entire county that doesn't claim to have inspired Lord of the Rings."

Rose sniffed. "Basically, the two of you are going overboard with the detail 'cos you still have no idea what time period it is."

"Not my fault the scanner's on the blink." The Doctor cast an accusatory glance at Jack. "I'm not the one who was guzzling Cheerios right next to the chronological actuator."

"We never eat!" Jack protested. "It's always 'push that button', or 'hand me the screwdriver', or 'hey, we've landed, let's go and explore a swamp full of crotch-eating piranhas!'"

"Yes, and I apologised for that," the Doctor said emphatically. "Look, I keep telling you - grab something before we go. There's a food machine in the corridor."

"Yeah, but which corridor?" said Rose. "Cos, you know, they keep moving."

"It's the one with Whistler's Mother. Third left, past the bins, round the back of the gerbil cage. Machine's two yards up."

"Oh, *there*. You mean the one that's broken?"

"It's not broken! You just have to thump it."

Rose rolled her eyes. "I'll thump *you* in a minute."

Jack pushed a leafy branch out of his eyeline. "Getting back to the matter in hand, what are we actually doing here?"

"The TARDIS picked up an outlier," the Doctor explained. "An anomaly that stands out. Energy signal of some kind, incongruous to its time. Haven't the foggiest what it could be, but it shouldn't be here. Whenever *here* is."

Rose wore a concerned look. "So this could be any period in history? We could get stomped on by a dinosaur?"

"Yeah," concurred Jack. "Or get chained to the wall by a hyper-intelligent ape."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Sounds like your perfect evening."

"*Anyway*," interrupted the Doctor, briskly, "it'll most likely be a pitstop. We slope in, have a gander, irritate the wrong people, most likely save the world or at least this province, then we go for a curry. Bob's your uncle..."

As a child, Rose had spent at least one afternoon every December at the Jericho Street Junior School Christmas bazaar. A hundred and fifty people crammed into a small hall built for piano-driven assemblies and indoor P.E. Folding tables crammed with tombola toys, discarded pink tickets littering the floor next to the styrofoam drinks cups and ketchup-smeared napkins. Games and a tinsel-lined grotto in the alcove where they usually kept the balance beams. Slade bellowing through a tinny P.A. Tired-looking parents shepherding sugar-infused, over-excited nine-year-olds through to freshly bleached toilets, fumbling with thin paper bags. The smell of pine needles, coal tar soap, and decaying potpourri; the jingle of a hundred pockets brimming with loose change. The woollen toy stand sharing a patch of wall near the tied-up climbing ropes and crash mats. Find a big, big space all on

your own.

Chance'd be a fine thing.

The scene they'd happened upon was, she reflected, a little like that. It was just a little more... rustic? The tables remained - wooden, instead of plastic, and perhaps a little rougher around the edges - but they were crammed with wreaths, ornamental logs, and twine-wrapped garlands. Berries the colour of molten lava sat on top of sparkling holly rings, prickly to the touch, through which unlit candles had been threaded. Pine cones had been fastened together to create crude, but well-intentioned animal sculptures. It was as if the forest had exploded into a clearing and then quietly organised itself into a National Trust craft workshop.

Everywhere you looked, the villagers were bustling. Dozens of dirt-smeared yokels, clad in functional greens and browns with the occasional splash of scarlet; wool and hessian and stitched leather. They laughed at the jugglers, quaffed ale like there'd been a heatwave, and munched on baked apples pulled from the ice house and held over open flames until their skins split. Mothers filled aprons with seasonal cheddars and posies of dried flowers while, at the edge of the clearing, their children swung jovially from the branches of trees.

And yet Rose could detect an undercurrent of irritation to proceedings. The joviality was forced, somehow. No - not forced. Overstated. The barkers' eyes were a little too bright, their invitations perhaps a little more sincere than they needed to be. It was as if people were determined to have a good time, and determined to make sure everyone else knew they were having a good time, and determined, in turn, to make sure everyone else had a good time as well, come hell or high water. It made her uncomfortable.

But the Doctor's face was a picture. His eyes shone like diamonds and the grin he wore could have housed a family of small woodland creatures. He looked like the kid running after the Coca Cola truck.

As his gaze flitted from one stall to another to yet another, Rose hung back and tapped Jack on the arm. "Hang on, he's gonna say it."

"You think he's gonna say it?"

"He always says it. It's like a ritual or something."

The Doctor's mouth opened wide and, with a sincerity that was neither overstated nor unwelcome, he uttered a single word. "*Brilliant!*"

He strode across the clearing in the direction of the mulled wine, as Rose's grin dropped into a scowl.

\*\*\*

They caught up with him near a vat full of simmering mixture, which was being ladled into plain wooden bowls by a woman of two-score years or thereabouts. Steam rose pleasantly from the vat, obscuring her just a little; cloves were floating on the surface, and small chunks of fruit could be seen bobbing just beneath it.

“Hot punch?” she asked. “This batch is fresh; should be about optimal drinking temperature. Lovely with a bit o’ Cheshire; maybe some of the bread from Patsy over there.” She smiled. It was a very intense smile, Rose thought. Her eye sockets looked like they’d been stretched.

They each picked up a bowl from the counter. “Nice get-up you’ve got here,” said the Doctor, genially.

“It is, is it not? And a decent turnout to boot. So good to know that the old ways are still important. Yes.”

His brow furrowed. “Old ways?”

“Oh, you knows. Yule is all about the tradition, ain’t it? Tradition’s important. Not like...”

She let the sentence fade into the chilly air and shifted her eyes right, just a tad, as if having noticed something offstage.

“Not like - ” said Rose after a moment, when the pause had shifted from anticipatory to uncomfortable.

The woman’s eyes moved back to her, but now they darkened. “*Them*,” she said, quietly, as if this were all the explanation they needed.

The Doctor opened his mouth to say something and then shut it. Rose noted it was something he did when he’d decided to let a scene play out. The woman went back to her punch bowl, stirring and sniffing and occasionally adding a pinch of something. All the while, she did not take her eyes from them.

“Ma’am,” said Jack after a moment. “What year is this?”

She blinked, and then sniffed at the wine. “’74 or ’75 I think. We traded for the raw ingredients with a group of merchants; it’s been in the cask ever since.”

“No, I - ” Jack put down the bowl and gestured with his hand. “What year is *this*? Right now, where we are?”

She gave the trio a peculiar look. “You been up in the sky or sommat?”

“If we said we had,” said Rose, “would you believe us?”

\*\*\*

"That was weird," said Jack as they strolled through the market, and the Doctor nodded.

"Definitely two sandwiches short of a picnic," he concurred. "Not that anyone here knows about sandwiches. I'd say we're sixth, maybe seventh century."

"We could just ask," said Rose.

"We already did. I don't think these people know, necessarily. They've got a different concept of time."

"But that woman." She munched on an apple. "I mean she was a bit intense and that, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe she was just on the sauce."

"Maybe." The Doctor stopped for a moment near the Pin-The-Tail-On-The-Mari-Lwyd attraction. "But you don't really think that. And neither do I."

Rose shook her head.

"There's something going on here," said the Doctor. "Oh, it may look like your normal run-of-the-mill everyday Yuletide celebration, but the vibe's weird. I mean *Scooby-Doo* weird. No, *Twin Peaks* weird."

"So what do we do?" said Jack.

"Obvious," replied the Doctor. "We split up and look for clues."

Rose was standing in a corner of the glade, near an oaken barrel, scratched and weather-worn, upon which sat a sizeable glass container. The container was large enough to hold a cat, or a puppy, or perhaps even a small child, but just now it was full of -

"Rats!" cried the barker. "Guess how many rats there are in the jar! Winner gets the jar! Wanna go, sweetheart?"

He was, she realised, addressing her. "No, thanks."

"Ah, come on. Just write your number on the slate over there." A lump of natural chalk sat on a tree stump next to a smooth grey slate, upon which had been daubed a selection of Anglo-sounding names and lopsided Roman numerals. One or two people had simply written 'Many'.

Rose picked up the chalk, then put it down again. "Many?"

"Some of 'em can't count," the man said with a shrug. "They won't win, but it's not my business. You, on the other hand" - he regarded her with a salesman's smile that verged on creepy - "look like you've got a natural gift for figures."

“And what do I want with a jar of rats?”

“Dunno. Boil ‘em up for a stew? Use ‘em for bait? I mean, the witches can’t get enough of ‘em.” This time, his glance was curious, rather than mildly lecherous. “You ain’t a witch, are ya?”

“No,” she answered, quickly.

“Shame,” he said with a sigh. “We ain’t had one round here for ages. People say they’re dying out.”

He leaned in closer. “It’s the changing times, y’see. Things ain’t what they were. There’s all this... invasion.”

Rose found her interest suitably piqued. “Invasion?”

The rat jar barker gave a sage nod. “Fundamentalist religious *nuts*.”

Some distance away, the Doctor was deep in conversation with the couple running the Lucky Dip. Periodically, a small child would come along and hand over a radish or a carrot in exchange for the privilege of delving their hand into a barrel that appeared to contain wood shavings and not a whole lot else. Or two of them had walked away with another radish; more often than not, they’d come up empty. The Doctor was convinced the whole thing was probably a scam, but he was keeping that card close to his chest for now, and would continue to do so until the couple had outlived their natural usefulness.

“And another thing,” said the man - whose name, the Doctor had discovered, was Roger - in his thick Brummie accent. “We’re not even allowed to call ‘em Yule trees anymore. We ‘ave to start calling ‘em ‘Christmas trees’.”

“Is that a fact?” asked the Doctor, who knew it wasn’t.

“Can you believe it? Ruddy stupid’s what it is. World’s gone mad, I’m tellin’ yer!”

“I ‘eard,” his wife Sheila chipped in, “that they’re knockin’ down the old henges so’s they can start buildin’ *churches*.” The word ‘churches’ was given the same sort of inflection that might be lent to ‘fatburg’, ‘genital herpes’, or ‘Snow White remake’. “I was down at the stream the other mornin’, doin’ me laundry with Ethelred the wart-ridden, and *she* said they’re buildin’ one over at Brent Tor, only the stones keep movin’ overnight. So every day the cross-freaks bring ‘em back.”

“It’s happenin’ all over,” Roger concurred. “Gunwalloe. Plympton. Alfriston. Hollington, Kensworth. It’s a war, is what it is. A holy war. Us and them. Thanks love, now stick yer ‘and in. Oh, what a shame. Better luck next time.”

“I’m sorry,” said the Doctor, shifting his weight to the side to allow the dejected child to

return to its parents, "but I'm just wondering. What's a cross-freak?"

"Give yer 'ead a wobble," said Roger with a hint of a sneer. "Cross-freak? Jesus lover? I mean, that's what they are, innit? They come over 'ere - "

"Come here? From where?"

"- they come over 'ere and they don't even try to assimilate," Roger went on, ignoring him. "They want their own rules, their own laws. No respect for our traditions."

Sheila nodded in agreement. "Most of 'em don't even pay taxes."

"I'll tell you this," said Roger. "This country's goin' down the aqueduct. They're taking away all our rights, all our freedom of expression."

The Doctor looked about him. "You seem to be doing all right here."

"Mark my words." Roger pointed at him with a scraggly finger. "This is a principled stand against a dying way of life. We're being choked. Cancelled. You can get arrested just for saying you're Celtic now."

"How do you know that?"

"A carriage driver told me."

His attention was drawn, all of a sudden, by the arrival of a small girl. Roger stared down at her, and not in a nice way. "And what do yer think you want?"

The small child fingered the radish in her left hand. "I wanted to have a -"

"Dressed like that?" Roger grabbed at the plain wooden cross she wore around her neck and held it between his filthy fingers. "You think you can just show up here and join in? Like that? With that - that *thing* 'anging round yer neck?"

"Why'd you even 'ave that?" demanded Sheila in an unreasonably loud voice, her hands on her hips.

The small child stammered. "My mummy makes them, and lots of people - "

"I don't give two hoots about your stinking mother!" Roger shouted. "This is Yuletide. Not 'Christmas' or whatever you wanna call it. This is a Pagan country, and it always will be. Now go on, gerrout of it."

He snatched his hand away and glared at the small child, who turned and fled.

"Sorry you 'ad to see that," said Roger, straightening up. "But I won't have that riff-raff contaminating things."

"Well, this has been fun," lied the Doctor, even as he kept one eye on the barrel. "But I did promise my friend I'd play him at Whack-a-Mole." He gave them one of his best fake smiles. "Can you point me in the right direction?"

"We don't 'ave Whack-a-Mole this year," said Roger. "The moles have got wise to it. Couldn't catch a single one. We had to 'ave a replacement game."

"Yeah?" the Doctor looked. "What is it?"

"Bop-the-Stoats."

"God, I thought Hammersmith was bad," said Rose, when they met up a couple of minutes later. "People round here are just so... I dunno."

"Angry?" said the Doctor, with one eye on a commotion on the other side of the clearing. "Yeah. I mean it's supposed to be a time of celebration, but everyone's just uptight. Grumpy."

Rose peered over to see what he was looking at. Five or six angry villagers were crowding round an upturned barrel, the contents of which - almost exclusively sawdust, from what she could see - were spilled over the ground. The couple running the stall were gesturing frantically and trying to clear up the mess, and ineffectively protesting against the cries of "Cheat!" and "Fix!"

The Doctor couldn't resist cracking a smile, and Rose noticed. "Did you do that?"

"Might've."

"Man, I gotta tell you," said Jack, huffing over to join them. "I've been in some weird places over the years, but nothing like this. It's like the epitome of repressed Englishness. I swear I've never seen so much latent hostility."

"So you had the same experience?" said Rose.

"I had a... variation of said experience," said the smiling Jack - whose cheeks, she noticed, were slightly inflamed.

The Doctor sighed in irritation and folded his arms. "We were supposed to be gathering information."

"I *did*," said Jack indignantly. "And I don't think this is just a matter of simple intolerance. These people are afraid of something. That's why they're so zealous; they don't have a choice. There's talk of a monster that feeds off doubt." He paused. "A monster that's already killed."

Rose offered a respectful nod. "Impressive."

"Yeah, well. You'd be surprised how much people can spill when they're -"

"Don't." Her hand was up. "Don't finish that sentence."

"It'd explain quite a bit about what's going on round here," said the Doctor. "Still -"

“Enjoying the festivities?” A new voice had interrupted: its owner was a tall, well-garbed man in his middle thirties. His hair hung long and loose on a neatly chiselled head, sharing space with a sharp nose, thin lips, and inquisitive, piercing eyes. Rose’s first thought was that he must be a king, because he didn’t have excrement all over him.

“I am Ceolmund,” he announced, in rich, cultivated tones, and he offered them a smile that was about as readable as a GP’s notebook.

Jack extended his hand and grinned. “Hi. Captain Jack Harkness.”

“Blimey.” The Doctor rolled his eyes.

“What? I’m making introductions.”

“You’ve already had dinner. Now you want dessert?”

“Hey now, *wait* - ”

“You two finished?” interrupted Rose.

The Doctor collected himself. “Right, yes, sorry. Hello. I’m the Doctor, and this is Rose Tyler. Take no notice of him.” He indicated Jack, who looked suitably affronted.

“Oh, I shall take notice of you all,” replied Ceolmund. “For you are welcome to our modest little gathering. Word must have spread far and wide for us to have attracted visitors who are so... cosmopolitan.”

There was something unpleasant about his use of the word ‘cosmopolitan’, and not for the first time that day (or even that hour) Rose found herself uncomfortable. “So are you the baron round here, or - ?”

“Dignitary? Yes. After a fashion. The lands are the property of our king, to whom I answer. And these people in turn answer to me.”

He began a casual stroll across the clearing in the manner of a man who thought he owned the place, a claim which was not without merit. The party followed him. As they walked, they noticed an understated deference from the people with whom Ceolmund was making eye contact: the dipping of a head, a lowered voice, perhaps the smallest bow.

“We keep our lives simple and respectful,” Ceolmund said. “There is a great love here for our national customs and traditions, and nowhere is this more prevalent than the Yuletide celebrations. What you see around you - nay, *who* you see - is the very best of what our humble corner of the kingdom has to offer.”

The Doctor gave him a sideways glance. “Everything going okay then, is it?”

“They’re a proud, hearty, and reverent people. Oh, we have our troubles and our trials, but not today. This is a time for giving thanks and celebration.”

“Right. Only they keep talking about a monster.”

Ceolmund stopped in his tracks. Rose stared. It was a lie, but she could see why the Doctor had done it. For the first time in the conversation, their host had lost a little of his statesman’s charm.

“Is that so?” he muttered, seemingly to himself. Then the smile was back. “Forgive me,” he said to the Doctor. “I would crave your pardon. These are good folks, but they are somewhat... driven, on occasion. These are things we try and keep under wraps. We certainly do not discuss them with strangers.” He regarded them all with a slightly suspicious gaze. “I find it hard to believe that anyone would.”

Jack coughed. Rose elbowed him in the ribs.

“But it’s true, though, isn’t it?” said the Doctor. “I mean you’ve got the whole shebang here, right down to the tombola. Except you’re trying too hard. All I can see is a lot of people overselling themselves. And what’s more, they’re doing it in the worst possible way. No one actually wants to talk about their pagan roots. They just wanna talk about how terrible the other lot are.”

Ceolmund bristled slightly. “If by ‘the other lot’, you mean - ”

“The Christians?” said the Doctor, brightly. “Yeah, that’ll be them.”

The bristling erupted into a minor volcanic fit. Ceolmund kept his voice low, but he could not (and perhaps did not want to) disguise its fury. “We *do not use* that word here.”

“But why not?” said Rose, who felt - despite being an agnostic even in a foxhole - suddenly defensive. “They’re a religion, same as yours.”

Ceolmund regarded her with contempt. “You believe so, do you? Tell me, child: what do you know of these blasphemous fools? Truly?”

“Well, I know that - ”

“Wrong.” Ceolmund steeped his fingers and offered a frosty glare. “If you knew anything, anything at all, you would not even raise the point. You would know that their goal is one of domination and repression. It is written in the fabric and framework of the teachings they follow. You would further know that there is a concentrated effort to usurp our way of life from underneath the pillars of Albion. Already they plot and draw their plans against us. It is said they have built a network of tunnels beneath the earth.”

“Tunnels?” Jack scoffed. “That’s a little far fetched.”

Ceolmund looked at him darkly. “It is not, sir. I assure you.”

“But you can prove it, right?”

“There is plenty of information available,” Ceolmund replied, airily. “It is just a question

of looking in the right place. I suggest you do so, rather than dismiss me out of hand."

"So tell me about this monster," said the Doctor.

There was a pause, and then a reluctant nod. "Very well. But not here."

Soon after, they were gathered at the southern edge of the clearing, away from the excitement. A row of birches sat next to a thicket, while a fallen larch provided foreground interest. A clump of decaying mushrooms nested at its base; every so often, a starling would land, peck, and then fly away, as if in disgust.

"It was but a fortnight ago," Ceolmund explained. "We found the first of them not too far from here. Her name was Sarah; she was a farmer's wife. Her body was wracked with claw marks."

"Couldn't a bear have done that?" asked Rose.

"That was our first thought. But the man who found the body saw something. A creature that had run and hid. It seems he disturbed it in the act of... well. Possibly eating."

She wrinkled her nose. "So it attacks humans and eats them?"

"Yes," Ceolmund said. "I believe that it does. The two victims we have discovered have both been missing limbs. And they were completely drained of blood. No bear did this."

"But you don't know what did," said Jack.

"On the contrary! I do. There is a creature who attacks in times of trial, preying on the weak. The villagers dare not name it, but I am not so coy." Ceolmund paused as if for effect. "*The Teiknitaeki*."

Rose looked to the Doctor, seeking some sort of confirmation or rebuttal. His expression was ambiguous.

"The *Teiknitaeki*?" echoed Jack.

"Two-legged, like us. But hideous of appearance. Claws, fangs, and fur. Cloaked in the skins of its victims, it stalks the forests, seeking out those whose faith has wavered. It strikes at those who doubt, those who fear. And then it drinks their blood like nectar, before vanishing without a trace."

"And that's happening here?" said the Doctor.

"Look around you." Ceolmund gestured at the clearing and the buzz of activity. "People do their best, but the new ways stand against all we hold dear. All that is important. The spread of Christianity lies so foul and thick that people begin to question whether the old gods have merit. Is it any wonder that we are besieged by a nightmare?"

\*\*\*

"You don't buy it, do you?" said Rose, as they watched Ceolmund wander back into the clearing, having made his excuses about 'needing to circulate'. It was like watching a James Bond villain at a party; all that was needed was a woman in a low-cut dress and a white-coated waiter serving Martinis.

"Oh, I believe him all right," said the Doctor. "Monsters prowling the countryside and indiscriminately murdering people? That's basically what gets me out of bed in the morning."

"You don't sleep."

"No, you don't see me sleep. Doesn't mean I don't."

"There's something off about his whole story," said Jack. "I'd trust him about as far as I could throw him. And the creature he described. The Teiknitaeki. Is that even a thing? 'Cos I've never heard of it."

"Nor have I. Most likely a local name for something I *have* heard of. There are plenty of creatures who feed off emotions, all over the universe. Doubt, though." The Doctor stroked his chin, thoughtfully. "Doubt's a new one."

"So what's the plan?" Rose clapped her hands together; the air had turned cold. "I'm assuming there *is* a plan, right?"

The Doctor beamed. "There's always a plan."

Sally was still fingering the cross round her neck when the shouting started. It drifted into her eardrums gradually, like an alarm clock, until it was just about the only thing you could hear. She recognised some of the voices: others sounded strange, almost foreign.

She wiped her nose again and emerged from behind the tree. There was an almighty row going on in the middle of the festival - not the one that she'd witnessed earlier, when Roger and Sheila's barrel had been overturned (which had secretly pleased her quite a bit). Instead, it was the new people, or at least one of them. The young lady with nice hair. Well, 'nice' in the sense that it wasn't crawling with insects. Sally had a low threshold when it came to these matters.

Said hair was flipping about now, flying behind the woman's head as she looked left and right and then left again, as if trying to take in as many people as possible. "It's all fake!" she was saying. "All of it! You've no idea what you're doing!"

The woman kept shouting - something about false gods - but Sally found her attention drawn to Ceolmund. She didn't know how she felt about Ceolmund. He had nice clothes,

but she didn't like the way he smiled at her. And then there was the stick. He sometimes carried a long, carved stick, the sort you used for walking, but he didn't look like he needed it for walking or for standing up, and so she was always a little bit worried that he was going to hit her with it.

He had the stick right now, and was tapping it against one of the tables, the sort of thing he did when he was very angry. Sally looked at his face: the eyes were quivering in their sockets, and the mouth was locked in a snarl. *Tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap.*

Rose was in full flow. "It's just ridiculous!" she was saying. "Here you all are, yelling about which of you gets to be right, and it's never occurred to you that maybe none of you are! Or, I dunno, all of you!"

She picked up a rabbit's foot. "I mean, you carry these for good luck, right? It's the same with crosses. They mean something, symbolically, but they're also carried for protection. This whole season is about rebirth. Light in the darkness. Well, the Christians believe the same. You ain't so different, are ya? And you keep yelling about how they're dangerous and panicking about them taking over, but where are they? Most of 'em are hiding, because *they're so blinkin' scared of you!*"

It was the sort of rant that would have impressed even her mother. Rose allowed her thoughts to drift to Jackie, just for a second, and was in the process of getting back into the zone when the woman who'd been serving the mulled wine suddenly clapped her on the shoulder.

"That's enough," she said, acidly. "I don't know who you are, or what you think you're doing cavorting around our festival with your blasphemous ways, but - "

"Oh, get out of it, you dozy twonk," said Rose, and it was at that moment that she was rugby-tackled to the ground by a hideous monster.

The wine vendor threw herself under a nearby table and the villagers screamed and scattered, but only far enough to form a rough sort of circle. The truth was they had half-expected (and even wanted) this to happen, and the spectacle that was sure to follow probably outweighed any potential danger. They suspected that the Teiknitaeki had only one victim in mind. They themselves had been decent, faithful people; what was a little schadenfreude between Pagans?

Besides, most of them had never actually seen the thing. One or two had picked up a fox skin and some paints from the crafting table and were frantically trying to draw it. They had to wait until the monster was actually facing them. It was currently pacing around Rose's apparently unconscious body, breathing heavily in low, guttural growls. It wore a

cloak made of some kind of filthy beige fabric that covered it completely, although the arms were visible through holes in the side. The claws clicked and clacked as a globule of something dribbled from the creature's furry, snout-like mouth, sitting on an ash-grey face, covered with hair.

The Teiknitaeki stared around at the villagers for just a moment. Then it turned its attention to the unconscious Rose. It dropped to a semi-crouch, legs askance. Eyed her stomach hungrily.

From her hiding place, Sally stared, terrified. Why would no one help her? And where were the other two men?

The Teiknitaeki raised its claw. Then Rose's eyes shot open and she rolled to the left, knocking the creature over as she went.

Scrambling upright, she managed a kick to the stomach. The Teiknitaeki roared, but in pain: it was winded. Then she was off, fleeing to the edge of the clearing through a gap in the line of villagers. Those nearest to her took several steps backward; they may have wanted blood, but if they got too close to the rampaging creature, there was a good chance the blood may have been their own.

Rose's heart was pounding in her chest and for a moment or two it looked as though she might be able to outrun her quarry. And then she came to the thicket, and found her way suddenly blocked.

The Teiknitaeki advanced, slowly. All eyes were upon it. Saliva dribbled down its neck. It flexed its claws, slashing at the air.

Rose looked around for a stick, a pebble, *anything*. A bramble would have done in a pinch.

The Teiknitaeki moved beneath the birch trees.

Then a voice cried "Now, Jack!"

A large hunting net fell from above, followed by a handsome rogue time agent who'd jumped down from the limb on which he was perched. They both landed on top of the unfortunate Teiknitaeki, who found itself pinned to the floor.

The Doctor emerged from his hiding place and ran over to help. The creature was slashing wildly at the net, and it came dangerously close to severing some of the cords, but Jack had managed to get a rope around its forearms. Together, they managed to tie it up, and then manhandled it back into the centre of the clearing, with Rose wandering along just behind.

The villagers regarded the scene with a smorgasbord of emotions: relief that the

creature had been captured; disappointment that they hadn't had the chance to see it kill anyone; anger that the blasphemous hussy who'd caused so much trouble appeared to be unharmed. And there was a lot of confusion. Because now that it had been subdued, the monster didn't look nearly so dangerous. In fact, it didn't even look very much like a monster at all. It looked -

The Doctor interrupted their thoughts by bunching down the end of the net so the Teiknitaeki's head was exposed. "Right," he said. "Now let's see who you really are." He shot a side grin at Rose. "Always wanted to say that."

Then he pulled at the creature's mask - why, the villagers found themselves wondering collectively, had none of them realised it was a mask? - and everyone stared at the grubby, dishevelled man underneath.

There was a moment's awkward silence while they tried to identify him through the grime. Then someone shouted "Why, it's Benjamin! The farm labourer running the guess-the-rats-in-the-jar stall!"

"And he would have gotten away with it too," muttered Jack, "if it weren't for us meddling kids."

"Benjamin!" It was Ceolmund, striding across the clearing, stick in hand and black as thunder. "What is the meaning behind this outrage?"

Benjamin coughed. Spat. Then he shook his head, as if to clear it. "Don't know what you mean."

"Take him away," said Ceolmund, thumbing at two large men who apparently served as security. "He will answer for this later."

"Hang on a minute," said Rose, as the guards strode toward the captive Benjamin. "Doesn't at least get the chance to explain himself to the rest of 'em?"

"There is nothing to explain," Ceolmund replied dismissively. "Clearly, we have all been the victims of a malicious prank. Luckily, no harm has been done."

Jack stared at him. "People have *died*."

"And he shall be brought to account."

"But don't you at least wanna know why?"

"I don't think he does," said the Doctor. "In fact, I think there's a very good reason why he's keen to wrap this up so quickly."

He turned to face the villagers. "Ask yourself this," he said. "Where'd he get the mask? And the claws?"

"Must've made them," said one of the villagers.

“Oh. Really?” The Doctor was in full Poirot mode, walking back and forth across the assembled throng, hands clasped neatly behind his back. “A farm labourer, you say? I mean, look at his hands.” He pulled off one of the claw-spiked gloves - for that, of course, is exactly what they were - and examined the human hand beneath it, which was thick-fingered and riddled with calluses. “These hands?”

“Then he bought it from a stall, or summat!” said the mulled wine vendor. “That’s right, innit, Ben?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Benjamin. “What mask?”

“And that’s another thing,” said the Doctor. “He doesn’t know what’s going on. Even when he’s bang to rights, he hasn’t got a clue.”

“So what are you saying?” said Rose, but Ceolmund was already striding back across the clearing, his face set and determined.

“Doctor,” he said. “I really think that - ”

The next few words were drowned in the throes of a momentary scuffle. Then the Doctor stepped away, holding Ceolmund’s cane.

“I demand that you return that!” said the outraged Ceolmund, as he made a series of ineffective swipes and grasps for the walking stick while the Time Lord moved it effortlessly out of the way with every fresh grab, without even looking at what he was doing. He was examining the woodwork.

“Nice,” he said. “Decent finish, sturdy to boot.” He threw it from one hand to another in the manner of a circus ringmaster. “Survive any number of knocks, this.”

He walked across the clearing to the unoccupied table that housed the jar of rats. Ceolmund made to follow, but then found himself unexpectedly prostrating at the feet of Rose, who had just tripped him.

“Oops,” she giggled. “Clumsy.”

“Like this, wasn’t it?” said the Doctor, as he tapped on the side of the table. Once. Twice. Three times. Another two.

Trapped inside his net, Benjamin seemed to go into a sudden trance. His head lolled to the side. Then his eyes narrowed, and his mouth curled into a snarl. He roared and struggled and it took the efforts of both guards - and Jack, who was keeping a close eye on things - to restrain him. He was staring with visible hate at Ceolmund, who backed away, terrified.

The Doctor tapped again, and Benjamin shook his head, apparently back to normal. The villagers stared. There was a sudden cry of “He enchanted him!”

"No, *he* enchanted him," said the Doctor, pointing the stick at Ceolmund. "Simple hypnosis. I just re-activated the spell, if you like. Particular sonic vibrations, done within earshot, make him think he's a monster. He runs off, gets the mask and the claws - both conveniently provided by his benefactor here - and then raises havoc."

There was a flurry of muttering, which varied between confusion and outrage. Rose took it all in.

"What's more," the Doctor went on, "it's very likely the hypnotic block is tied to the harmonic resonance of this particular chunk of wood. Which means, if I do this - "

He snapped the cane across his knee. Ceolmund's eyes went wide with fury, but he said nothing.

"Done. Spell broken, permanently. Back to normal. And no harm done, thankfully."

Roger - still nursing a black eye from the fight with the wood-turner - wasn't having any of it. "He killed people!"

"No he didn't," said the Doctor. "They were already dead. Those claws couldn't puncture a balloon. You've got bears? It was a bear. Ceolmund found the bodies and arranged the scene to make it look like something far worse. Even did a bit of DIY dismemberment to really get the point across. Meanwhile, he hypnotises poor Benjamin here, sticks him in a mask, and arranges to have him show up just in time for a hapless villager to discover him. Then he runs off and hides in the woods, your glorious leader disables the hypnotic block, Benjamin hasn't got a clue what he's done."

"Next thing we know, you lot are scared and paranoid and overly zealous, which I guess I can understand. You all think you've seen a monster. And in a funny way you have." He glared at Ceolmund. "It's just not the one in the mask."

He walked over to Ceolmund so they were no more than a metre apart. "So tell me. Why?"

Ceolmund wrinkled his face in disgust. "This country - " he began.

Then he spat on the ground; it looked most undignified. "This country has gone to the dogs. Our ways are forfeit to blasphemy and heresy. The new religion is taking over. I had to do something."

"So this is your answer?" The Doctor kept his voice quiet and level, something he only did when he was at his angriest. "You scare people into aggressive posturing by creating a monster that kills anyone whose faith is weak. You've got a crowd of angry villagers - textbook horror story, by the way - who get all riled up and suspicious of anyone who's different, simply so you can rule in the name of unity. You're not even prepared to do the legwork yourself, Ceolmund. You got a local lackey to do it for you. I'd wager you didn't

even pay 'em."

Ceolmund sneered. "As if a man like you would understand. We cannot all venture from place to place without a care in the world, Doctor. Some of us have responsibilities. Some of us must lead."

"Except that's not been going too well, has it?" said Jack. "You've been struggling for some time. This isn't leadership; this is desperation."

"Yeah," Rose chipped in. "You remind me - "

"Silence, you impetuous girl!" snapped Ceolmund.

"You remind me of a girl I knew on the Powell estate," Rose continued, calmly. "She didn't like the idea of me going out with a black fella. Said they should stick to their own, and so should we. So she started all sorts of rumours. Nasty ones. I actually think she probably fancied him a bit, though she never let on."

"You never told me about that," said the Doctor.

"You never asked. And that's okay." Rose offered a faint smile. "Thing is, her home life was a complete mess. Stepdad was horrible. Mum drank. That sort of thing. Didn't make what she did okay, not by a long stretch. But the truth is, I kind of felt sorry for her."

She tucked away a loose strand of hair and then looked back at Ceolmund. "I don't feel sorry for you."

Ceolmund was a bubbling torrent of rage. He glared - at Rose, at Jack, at the Doctor. "These people," he said, his voice a furious whisper, "*need taking in hand.*"

"Oh, I'm sure they do," said the Doctor. "And you're just the fella to do it, aren't you? And I bet that if people were to look closely - I mean really look - at the way you govern them, they'd find all sorts of things that aren't quite right. Casual beating here, bit of misplaced funding there. So what do you do? You invent stuff. You give 'em a scapegoat. If people are unhappy, it's better if they're not unhappy with you. There's nothing takes the heat off you like finding someone else to hate instead."

Jack glanced over at the guard. "You guys known him long?"

"Since we was kids," the guard replied. "Even back then, he was a twa—"

"Never mind that," said the Doctor. "Don't judge him for that; look at what he's doing now. And react accordingly."

Ceolmund had undergone his interrogation in an impotent fury, but when Rose looked at him again she was disturbed to see that he looked composed and collected, and almost... happy?

"You think you've won, don't you, Doctor?" he said, calmly. "You believe they'll lock me

up and find someone willing to take over? On what charge? If a bear was responsible, whom have I murdered? Indeed, what crime have I committed, besides an act of fraudulent desperation in the service of the greater good?"

And just like that, it clicked in her brain, and Rose realised what was bothering her.

"Doctor?" she said. "Something about this doesn't make sense."

He nodded. "I know."

"Cos if... if the monster was a bloke in a mask, then why did the TARDIS land here?"

Ceolmund was so busy ranting he didn't notice that the ground had begun to shake.

"You will see," he went on. "You will *all* see. Oh, this is takeover by stealth. It starts quietly. And then it will become open. You will not be happy the day they ban your way of life. Force you to worship in *their* buildings. Honouring *their* god. Diluting and eradicating our culture, the very things that make us who we are, just to pacify their own demented delusions. Mark my words! Mark me, people!" Ceolmund had climbed onto a table and was addressing the villagers, at least some of whom were nodding and agreeing along with him. "Apathy and indifference shall be the end of you! Wake up, you lost and lonely sheep! See the plague of heresy that approaches and the violence it carries in its wake! Beware the deceptive smiles of the Christian and his claims of a 'religion of peace'. I see him and his cross of cruel repression and I am filled with despair and foreboding. For like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood!"

The forest floor cracked, and opened.

The creature was at least eighteen feet high. Not only had it risen from the earth; it appeared to have brought a substantial amount of the earth with it, being composed largely of heavily compacted soil that shifted about as it swayed back and forth. The soil was shaped beneath the neckline to form a pair of arms, thick and sinewy; the tendrils attached to the end served as makeshift fingers. Two turnips were its eyes, and it had a mouth full of bones for teeth.

After a moment, Jack said, "Well, that explains the energy readings."

The villagers had mostly scattered. Some left, vowing to give the Brerebury Yuletide celebration a miss next winter. Those that remained were hiding behind (or in) the thicket, or in the process of climbing trees. A selected few had thrown themselves under the tables in the mistaken belief that two inches of wood could somehow protect them from an angry bone-toothed forest god; it reminded Rose of the propaganda videos she'd seen about duck-and-cover. Perhaps some things never changed.

Only the four of them remained at the heart of things: the Doctor, Rose, and Jack, gathered together in the middle of the clearing, and Ceolmund, still on his table, and apparently frozen in fear. The Doctor was looking at the creature with concern tempered by recognition; he was apparently in the process of formulating a strategy, and if you listened beneath the creature's roars and snarls, you could almost hear the cogs whirring in his head.

"What the hell is it?" said Rose.

"It's a Mantruvian Assimilation," said the Doctor. "Comes to a planet as a seed, usually attached to a meteorite. Works its way into the local terrain, adapts to whatever it's come into contact with. And then it bides its time. Waits."

"Waits for what?"

"They feed off emotions. Legends are usually based in fact. Ceolmund was lying about the Teiknitaeki, but he must've told a recognisable version of a story they knew, else no one would've believed him." He glanced over at the quivering dignitary. "Ironically, he turned out to be correct."

"What sort of emotions?" said Jack.

"Fear. Envy. Despair." The Doctor looked at the Assimilation; it swayed left and right, foul breath emanating from the enormous mouth. "This one looks like it runs on hate."

"They should meet the Daleks," Jack muttered.

"It won't leave until it's eaten," said the Doctor. "So we should give it what it wants."

"What does it want?" said Rose.

The Doctor offered the two of them a scared smile. "Lunch."

Jack sucked in his breath and stepped forward.

"Then it should start with me," he said. "Whatever anyone else may have done here today, I've been a terrible person. I've been reckless. I've caused death, simply because I didn't care enough about other people. I'm the epitome of hatred. If there's anyone here that's gonna pacify that thing, I'm probably the best fit."

The Doctor sighed.

"Jack," he said. "You're an idiot. Brave, but an idiot. You don't have the first idea of the life I've lived."

He turned to face the Assimilation. It had ceased its roaring, momentarily, and stared down at him with a quizzical look. The turnip eyes rattled, and the tendrils flexed, waiting.

"I've wiped out planets," said the Doctor. "Done untold damage to countless worlds.

I've sacrificed lives without a second thought, all in the name of peace. I've destroyed civilisations, including my own. Oh, I try and justify it. Tell myself I can't get to them all. Say that time is relative and morality is complicated. But that's just how I sleep at night."

*He doesn't sleep*, Rose thought to herself. And then: *Is he serious about this? Or is it some colossal bluff?*

"I am hate personified," the Doctor continued. "Not him."

The Assimilation leered, the teeth grinding, the colossal body swaying. Rose found herself thinking of Little Shop of Horrors.

"Two meal choices," said the Doctor, calmly. "Well, no choice at all, far as I'm concerned. But you're the one with the menu."

The Assimilation hesitated. Its tendrils flexed. The turnip eyes swivelled from Jack to the Doctor. And then over to Jack again.

It roared, once. And then it leaned its soily body forward, grabbed hold of Ceolmund and ate him alive, along with the table.

Then, with a rumble and a squelch and a noise that sounded like the noise you might expect sentient soil to make if it burped, it disappeared back into the forest floor, and all was still.

There was a stunned silence, broken once more by Jack. "Well. Looks like someone was on the naughty list."

The Doctor gave him a look. "Seriously. Why? Why would you make that reference? No one here is gonna get that reference."

"Hey, *you* got it."

"Hello? Twenty-first century Earth girl over here," said Rose, getting up.

The Doctor sighed.

"You can come out now!" he called to the villagers, some of whom were peeking out from behind the thicket, or trying to get down from the tree limbs on which they perched. "Bit of cleaning up, I'm afraid, and you'll have to elect a new official. Or have a brawl or an archery contest, whatever it is you do. Sadly, we have to be off. Take care, try not to kill each other."

"Doctor - " began Rose.

But Jack shook his head: "Leave it."

The trio left the clearing, the Doctor taking point. He'd addressed the villagers with characteristic chirpiness, but his face was black as thunder. They'd gone five yards when he

stopped, and turned round.

"You know," he said, by way of an afterthought. "There's probably a lesson to be learned from all this. But we'll let you figure that one out on your own, shall we?"

They walked back through the forest. The sky had clouded over, washing it to a dull grey-brown. The thinnest of rains felt as if it might fall; the air was damp and thick and sodden.

"So that's it, then?" said Rose. "You're just gonna leave it there?"

"Yep," said the Doctor. "We can't exactly take it with us. We'd never get it through the door. And I'm not killing it."

"It killed Ceolmund!"

"It can't help its nature. And listen. If I'm being pragmatic, I don't think he'll be missed."

"You don't mean that," she said hotly.

The Doctor stopped, and rounded on her.

"Of course I don't. But what choice do I have? What's done is done. That thing is gonna stay in the soil forever. Or until someone builds a car park on it. I'm not happy with what it did, but it was hungry. And of the four of us, it picked him." The Doctor stared at her. "Think about that, Rose. Think about what it tells you."

"You were gonna give your life," she said, quietly.

The Doctor gave the tiniest of glances in Jack's direction. "So was he."

"Actually, I wasn't," said Jack, fishing a small round device from his pocket. "I was carrying a thermal detonator. Five second release. I'd have dropped it into that thing's mouth."

They stared at him, appalled. "You'd have killed it!" said the Doctor.

"Nope," said Jack. "I adjusted the spread to compressed fragmentation. Enough to give it stomach pains; that's all."

He grinned. "So what was your plan, Doc? I mean you musta had one."

"Doesn't matter," said the Doctor, and resumed walking.

"It's a tabloid writer's dream headline, don't you think?" Jack went on. "'Monsters ate my landowner.' Whatever happens next, those villagers are gonna have a hell of a story."

"Yeah," muttered Rose. "Until they forget."

"You think they will?"

"People always do," she said. "It's like something gets thrust in front of 'em, something really big and important, and you feel like it ought to be life-changing. And then it isn't, and they carry on making the same old mistakes over and over."

"That's the nature of the human race," said the Doctor. "It's always about stretching out. Developing. You never realise when you're repeating events that should never be repeated, least not until it's too late. Oh, you're good with archiving *facts*, but when it comes to spotting the patterns, you've got less long-term memory than a goldfish. Which is weird, seeing as you're actually descended from - "

"Was this gonna be another stupid apes gag?" Rose interrupted. "Because I gotta tell you, I'm actually finding those kind of offensive."

The Doctor cleared his throat. "Sorry. No comment."

"In any case," said Jack, "we bought them some time. And if they know there's a creature down there that lives off hate, maybe they'll be a little nicer to each other, at least for a while."

The Doctor nodded. "We can hope. Yeah."

"Thing is, though," said Rose. "All that stuff... everything they were saying about Christians taking over - "

"Rose," interrupted the Doctor. "I know where this is going, and believe me, it's a theological cul-de-sac."

"But - well, it happened, didn't it? I mean, we can act like it didn't, but it did."

"Yeah. It did." The Doctor stopped. "But not in the way they feared. And even if it did, doesn't mean it's gonna happen again."

"I just..."

"Listen to me." The Doctor offered her a warm smile. "I would dearly love to stand in the middle of an English forest and discuss this, but I'm also starving. Can we save the debate for the curry we said we were gonna have?"

She sighed. "Fine. Curry it is."

"Mine's an amok trei!" called Jack from the tree stump where he'd been re-lacing his boot, and the Doctor nodded.

"Now," he said. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

They had reached the TARDIS; the Doctor fumbled with the key and with a creak the wooden door swung open, and shut behind the last of them. From inside, you could hear

the sound of laughter, footsteps, and levers being pulled.

And from nearby, there was a rustle in the undergrowth.

A cold, wet nose, sitting at the end of a black-and-white striped snout. Two beady eyes watching from the darkness.

The badger poked its way out and stood and waited.

The light on top of the box began to flash. Then with a wheezing, groaning sound, the box disappeared completely.

The badger sat and beheld the hum of the forest, and the empty space where the box had just been standing.

*“Exquisite,”* it said.

# What Makes a Companion?

Philip Bates



**Here's an exclusive extract from *Companions: More Than Sixty Years of Doctor Who Assistants*, out now from Candy Jar Books.**

Finding a topic for *Doctor Who* fans to argue about is like shooting Fish People in a barrel. Are you allowed to have a favourite Doctor? Are the Virgin New Adventures 'canon'? Who's the best showrunner? But one of the most prevalent questions is surely: what makes a *Doctor Who* companion?

In considering this, you have to take note of all those the Doctor became friends with, and question if they can really be seen as 'companions'. Some are obvious: Ian and Barbara, Amy and Rory, Ben and Polly – all travelled in the TARDIS and fought monsters side-by-side with the face-

changing alien. Others muddy the water, including one person many think of as the very first companion: Susan. Actress, Carole Ann Ford doesn't class her as the Doctor's companion; she's his granddaughter, not some fly-by-night human looking for an escape from earthly troubles.

Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart falls into the latter category. Few can agree whether he should be classed as the Doctor's companion or not. He doesn't strictly adhere to the blueprint set out by the likes of Susan, Barbara, and Ian, but then, neither do K9, River Song, or Leela.

Twenty-first century *Doctor Who* further complicates matters. The 2009 Specials, for example, boast a succession of would-be companions like Captain Adelaide Brooke (*The Waters of Mars*), Lady Christina de

Souza (*Planet of the Dead*), and Jackson Lake (*The Next Doctor*)... who has a companion himself!

So how do we separate the Wrights from the wrongs?



You have to analyse the Doctor's relationship with that person, and trust is a key part of any relationship. In travelling with him, companions become his representatives in some ways; he must have confidence in them doing the right thing when he's not there. But there are numerous companions who can't be trusted.

When he first met her in *Silence in the Library/ Forest of the Dead* (2008), the Tenth Doctor was sceptical of River Song, despite her assurances that she was someone he'd 'trust absolutely'. It took her to whisper his real name for him to realise their shared future. Nonetheless, he's keen to get away from River when they next meet, and her duplicity is highlighted when it's revealed she's imprisoned in the Stormcage facility. Whereas River gains his trust, the Doctor never holds any faith in Adam Mitchell – which proves just as well: Adam swiftly puts time and space in peril and is duly dumped back home, with a hole in his head for his troubles.

Some might be unsure about giving River Song and Adam Mitchell 'companion' status, but few can quibble over Kamelion's inclusion. The Doctor shows great confidence in him, yet, in *Planet of Fire* (1984), the shape-shifting android caves in to the Master. He's not the only Fifth

Doctor companion who's not trustworthy.

'Turlough was an alien, so when you first saw him, you needed to be a bit suspicious of him: he shouldn't have looked quite right,' actor, Mark Strickson explains. 'People often say, "weren't you too old to play a schoolboy?" And I could throttle them! I was not a schoolboy; I was an alien who had landed *posing* as a schoolboy. It's just completely different. So if, when you first saw me, you thought, "oh, he's too old to be a schoolboy, he looks weird" – that's exactly what you were supposed to think! Immediately be suspicious of him.' Vislor Turlough's backstory wasn't expanded upon until his last serial, *Planet of Fire*, and his *raison d'être* was as a mysterious companion whose motivations remained elusive. The Doctor learned to trust him, encouraging him to find his own titular prize in *Enlightenment* (1983). A far cry from the schoolboy who was going to cave the Time Lord's head in at the cliffhanger of his debut episode.



You might think a proclivity to violence would stop fans from classifying someone as a companion. In theory, the Doctor doesn't approve of militaristic or rash

action. He definitely spends enough time scolding the Brigadier for using such means to attack enemies.

Except that's not entirely true.



In *Journey's End* (2008), Davros tells the Doctor that 'you take ordinary people and you fashion them into weapons.' The Doctor certainly uses people: Ace is a good example of this because he says he doesn't like her use of Nitro-9, though is happy enough to exploit her unhealthy obsession. Other companions are more than willing to get their hands dirty: Captain Jack Harkness, Leela, and River Song all revel in combat. The Tenth Doctor is visibly disgusted to learn Jack works for Torchwood and at the Captain's suggestion that he break the Master's neck in *The Sound of Drums* (2007). The Fourth Doctor frequently refers to Leela as 'savage' and attempts to educate her on the ways of pacificism. At least with River, the Eleventh Doctor admits that she 'has her own gun, and unlike me, she really doesn't mind shooting people. I shouldn't like that. Kind of do - a bit.' The Doctor uses all these companions' less-desirable attributes for his own purposes while also decrying them. He's a hypocrite, but we forgive him for that because he tries to be better. A brief glance over the list of people associated with the Doctor disperses the notion that adherence to violence excludes anyone from being a companion.

It's not this which excludes Captain Mike Yates and Sergeant Benton, whose statuses, like the Brigadier, are ambiguous. Many see them as recurring characters, in a similar fashion to Jackie Tyler, Sylvia Noble, and Professor Travers. Osgood is perhaps the

nearest example: as with Yates and Benton, she's part of the UNIT family, so doesn't travel with the Doctor but remains a regular face working on Earth's defences.

Do companions have to travel in the TARDIS to qualify for companion status? If so, *The Three Doctors* (1973) would elevate the Brigadier and Benton to this distinction. However, it would also qualify Eldrad (*The Hand of Fear*), Courtney Woods (*Kill the Moon*), and a large array of characters throughout the 1980s, including much of the cast of *Earthshock* (1982). It would further discount Liz Shaw, the Third Doctor's aid during the period when the TARDIS wasn't working. Surely no one can question whether she's a companion or not.

Harry Sullivan occupies an interesting place in *Doctor Who*. He's part of the UNIT family and travels extensively with the Doctor, both with and without the TARDIS. And while he joins the Doctor and Sarah Jane in something of a whirlwind, even before that he demonstrates an intuition and independence that marks him apart from some fellow UNIT employees. This could be



because he's employed as a surgeon rather than a soldier (much like Liz Shaw and Martha Jones), allowing him some flexibility due to a different degree of expertise. Nonetheless, it remains paramount for anyone under the employ of the military to obey orders.

Ian Marter had auditioned for the part of Harry when it was thought an older Fourth Doctor would be cast, hence his being written out in *The Android Invasion* (1975), when it became clear Tom Baker didn't need someone else to do physically exhausting scenes. *Doctor Who*, as a programme, demands some action-adventure traits, so it becomes a necessity to cast characters perfect for this part. William Russell, Peter Purves, and Michael Craze were all taken on as 'action heroes' as William Hartnell couldn't fulfil that role on the show; arguably Frazer Hines and Nicholas Courtney were hired for the same purpose, albeit for Patrick Troughton and Jon Pertwee (although we all know how much the latter enjoyed his James Bond moments).

Ultimately, what makes a companion is the intent of the production team.

Someone like Katarina, although having much less screen time than Sara Kingdom, is regarded as a companion because she was created to be so; yes, even Kamelion, who only appeared in two adventures, since he was intended to be a companion. Grace Holloway falls into the grey area, half companion, half almost companion, because the intent was that she'd become the Doctor's companion had a series been picked up on the success of *The Television Movie*. No such series materialised.

It's inevitable, then, that we all have different criteria in mind when classifying companions – and that's okay. Much like the TARDIS, *Doctor Who* fandom is infinite in its view, and no one view is better than the other.

After all, *Doctor Who* tells us to keep an open mind. One common theme in the series is that companions can be found

anywhere and everywhere. Look at the people who have travelled with the Doctor, at the diverse cultures and times represented on the TARDIS. Jamie and Amy might share an accent, a love of fried food, and a place in the Time Lord's hearts, but their lives are poles apart otherwise.

But it's not all about people. *Doctor Who* tells us that we all have companions, and they're often more intangible than we initially think. Take *Listen* (2014) for example, in which Clara Oswald tells a young Doctor: 'Fear is like a companion. A constant companion, always there. But that's okay. Because fear can bring us together. Fear can bring you home. I'm going to leave you something just so you'll always remember: fear makes companions of us all.'

Clara's sentiment echoes one expressed by the First Doctor in *An Unearthly Child* (1963). 'Fear makes companions of all of us, Miss Wright,' he tells Barbara. 'Fear is with all of us, and always will be. Just like that other sensation that lives with it... Your companion referred to it: hope.'

If we define the term 'companion' as something that accompanies us throughout our life – or even something that accompanies us through a substantial amount of time – we're surrounded by companions. That could mean people: for the Doctor it is, and similarly it's the TARDIS.

It's art too, in all its mediums: screen, theatre, dance, and music. The ear-worms the Twelfth Doctor mentions in *Before the Flood* (2015) underscore our lives. In this sense, companions are an expression of self. It's that ELO song you're humming, that person you can't get off your mind, or the programme you love so much, your house is brimming with associated memorabilia.

***Companions: More Than Sixty Years of Doctor Who Assistants* is available now from Candy Jar Books. The 700-page book features extensive details on every companion who's travelled with the Doctor, from Susan "Foreman" to Ruby Sunday, and beyond, including adventures in novels, comics, audios, and more.**

# Reviewed: Joy to the World

Philip Bates



For his 50<sup>th</sup> *Doctor Who* script, Steven Moffat's *Joy to the World* is a curious episode. At times, it screams "Steven Moffat" loudly and proudly, and it's glorious; at other times, however, it's clumsier and less engaging than a lot of his other work and might be considered by a lesser writer. Despite that, it's something of a high-point in the Fifteenth Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) era.

It starts off all a bit fast and weird – *Doctor Who* can do fast and weird nicely, as can Moffat, but the first few scenes after the titles sequence just didn't quite land. These introduce Joy Almondo (Nicola Coughlan), the Sandringham Hotel, and the slightly more grand but certainly more ambitious Time Hotel. Moffat's pitch for the latter, it could be argued, was central to his getting the job (more accurately, Moffat's expertise, writing experience, and sheer brilliance got him the job... alongside, of course,

showrunner, Russell T Davies, not having time to write it himself): the Time Hotel allows guests in the future to visit seemingly every hotel in human history via those locked doors in hotel rooms. A neat premise. A very Moffat premise. It's very clever, very unusual, very *Doctor Who*.

Enter Joy, who's escaping something in her personal life because she's checking into the Sandringham Hotel for Christmas. Then enter receptionist, Anita Benn (Steph de Whalley), who takes her to her room, and comes back to give Joy some fresh towels, only to instead intrude on Joy as she meets Melnak (Jonathan Aris), a Silurian Manager of the Time Hotel who's popped in, while under a form of mind control, on a mission with a Star Seed in a briefcase. So far, so nuts.

That's okay though: *Doctor Who* often is nuts and pulls it off beautifully. But this time, it

doesn't feel quite right. It's probably because people act very strangely here, even when not having their mind controlled. Joy begins a conversation with a fly to underline how lonely and sad she is; you can only just about hear the fly, however, and as this is *Who*, she could equally be chatting away with someone who's invisible or something. It could've been better handled with no words; think of the Doctor's obvious depression at the end of *The God Complex* as he's staring around, with a profound horror, at his empty TARDIS. Then, when Anita walks in on the Silurian, she is initially bemused, and doubly shocked when the Doctor also wanders in, but then just... leaves. Never mind encountering an apparently alien race (I know the Silurians aren't aliens – don't write in with complaints – but Anita and Joy must surely think him extraterrestrial); as someone who works at a hotel, she should be alerted that something's wrong when she sees a stranger in Joy's room, especially as Joy is visibly upset and panicked. It feels like something major has been lost in the edit.

We also meet Trev (Joel Fry), who works at



the Time Hotel and who has swiftly become the Doctor's right-hand man. The two share some lovely dialogue and you can really see the intent behind Trev's character. Sadly, Fry is surprisingly wooden, and, when left without Gatwa to accompany him, turns in a particularly clunky death scene.

*Doctor Who* often makes the unbelievable believable by packaging it up with realistic enough dialogue and reactions, but little in these early scenes ring true at all.

Fortunately, things improve massively once the Doctor is stranded at the Sandringham Hotel, cut off from the TARDIS, the Time Hotel, and Joy, not to mention the Star Seed, for a full year. The whole section is wonderful. It glows. It's an absolute gem





and one of the best bits in the Fifteenth Doctor era. The most amazing thing Moffat does when writing *Doctor Who* is writing not for a specific incarnation of the Doctor but writing for *the Doctor*. In his best stories, he approaches the Doctor as he should: as if it's one person. So Ncuti, in *Joy to the World* (as in *Boom*, Moffat's Series 14 episode starring Gatwa), is the most Doctor-y he's ever been. It's a genius move having him doing odd jobs around the place, befriending Anita, and questioning whether a sink plunger is "armed", and allows him to shine as the Time Lord. I sometimes think Ncuti's Doctor is too normal, but here, he's the Doctor: not quite right yet perfect.

The relationship he has with Anita is warm and engaging. It's more joyous than anything else in the episode, which is otherwise filled with nice little moments that tread the line between heartwarming and mawkish. The ending, especially watching Joy's mum somehow be teleported to a far-off star as she dies, teeters over the edge into mushy territory, though perhaps this is because I never buy into Joy. This is the first main role I've seen

Nicola Coughlan in, and I know she's highly acclaimed, but I don't think there's anything exciting or captivating about her performance here. It's shockingly easy to forget all about the "Joy" in *Joy to the World*.

The core of her character, the guilt she feels about not being there for her mum when she passed away, is something a lot of people will connect with at least; so too the frustration with the political parties for the way their members flaunted the rules of the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Curiously, the whole thing feels a bit like *The Doctor, the Widow and the Wardrobe*, though that was a lot warmer. Nonetheless, both episodes leave you with a smile on your face and are held together by two fantastic Doctors.

While Gatwa's previous Christmas special, *The Church on Ruby Road*, might be tainted somewhat by the revelations inflicted upon it by *Empire of Death*, Ncuti's second (and, it seems, final) Christmas special will likely be looked at more fondly as time passes. *Joy to the World* has enough joy to make it a real festive treat. Let's hope it's not Steven Moffat's last *Doctor Who* though...

# Reviewed: The Robot Revolution

Simon Danes



Cards on the table from the outset: I didn't think much of *The Robot Revolution*. Other opinions are available; this is only a personal view. I just felt it didn't really hang together.

I watched it twice and something started bugging me fairly early on: Who is this aimed at? Who is it *for*?

Some of the storytelling seemed clearly designed to appeal to a very young audience. There's nothing wrong with that; without getting into the debate of how far *Doctor Who* was originally intended to be a children's programme, most of us will have become fans when we were very young indeed (in my case, as a pre-schooler glued to the Patrick Troughton stories). And yet, some of it jarred badly. Chatting to friends about the episode, something came up very quickly, which may at first seem a minor point and hardly worth mentioning. But what kind of children's programme includes the incineration of a cat, complete with comedy "miaow", as a joke? How many children would think that was funny, rather

than cruel and upsetting? Bit of a major misstep, surely?

(Malcolm Hulke's *Writing for Television* includes the advice that, if you introduce a dog or cat into a drama when children are watching, and part of the plot includes a disaster like a sinking ship or a destroyed building, always include a shot of the dog or cat at the end to reassure the children that he or she was okay.)

That's enough about cats. I'm only including it, really, as an example to suggest the script didn't really work. And that's odd. Russell T Davies is capable of some very fine writing; *Midnight* and the Jeremy Thorpe drama, *A Very English Scandal*, spring immediately to mind. He does season finales very well. But he's also turned out quite a lot of substandard and pretty silly stuff too: *New Earth*, *The Next Doctor*, and quite a few others. He's uneven and he badly needs a script editor. He doesn't always make the right calls.

A strain of opinion – not quite yet received

wisdom – among fandom is that RTD2 is not a patch on RTD1. We haven't seen the best of his work since he returned; at the moment, the best is very much in the past. To be honest, I think he's gone backwards to the realms of some of his poorer early judgements; we're back in the world of toilet humour, burping bins and flatulent aliens, and of brash and silly visuals driving the stories (cf the Cyberking stomping on Victorian London and the Master zooshing into the air like a Roman candle). Come on, old chap: you're better than this.

RTD2 also incorporates the 'developments' in storytelling of the Chris Chibnall years: the relentless messaging (less prevalent in this episode, admittedly), the Timeless Child (which should have been ditched along with the half-human Doctor of the Paul McGann *TV Movie*), and so on. It doesn't take into account the tonal changes introduced in the Steven Moffat era, with the re-stressing of character over plot and the attempt to find the emotional core of the stories. Bill and Amy were real people, beautifully written and superbly acted; Peter Capaldi and Matt Smith really understood the character of the Doctor and played him with total conviction. Multi-layered performances of multi-faceted characters. They were compelling to watch.

And yet Davies is also capable of doing this as well – when he wants to. David Tennant was great (though I prefer Smith and Capaldi). Donna was one of the best companions in the series' entire 60 year run. What's happened? Why has it all gone off the boil so much?

I try to like Ncuti Gatwa's Doctor. He's a very good actor. I just think so much of what his Doctor does is out of character. We had another scene in *The Robot Revolution* in which the Doctor is crushed and frozen by the enormity of what's going on around him, and has to be brought back to earth and galvanised by the companion. But he's a stronger personality than that. He weeps copiously and excessively (can you imagine Jon Pertwee or Tom Baker doing that?). He's Tiggerish in his joy and he calls people 'babe' and kisses the TARDIS. (William Hartnell might use the occasional 'my dear' when he's very, very fond of people, and he

might occasionally give the police box an affectionate pat – but kissing the thing? Hardly.) We've yet to see the gravitas, the moral centre, the moral outrage. I can't imagine his Doctor (or Jodie Whittaker's, for that matter) debating the ethics of the Daleks' creation with Davros, as Tom did so superbly all those years ago. I just can't.

Well, well. It's good to see Varada Sethu back. She was outstanding in *Boom*: a genuinely beautiful performance. Belinda Chandra's got real potential and is in the hands of a very impressive actor. A bit older than most of the companions: she's 32, though we don't yet know how old the character is. A professional woman and a strong character (maybe a touch of the Liz Shaws here?).

As for the rest of the episode: um... I haven't really got a lot to say. The design was variable: the cybernetically enhanced Alan was superb; the robots less so. I know the official line is that Disney has nothing to do with the creative decisions, but I do wonder. Those robots looked very Disney to me. Music was good though for partially deaf people like me – it's so loud that we have to have the subtitles on because we can't hear the dialogue (actually, that's a pretty serious problem). I just thought much of it fell into the category of 'seen it before'. Aliens smashing up a semi (*The Star Beast*), robots with emojis (*Smile* – and done far better there, too), a big menacing mechanical thing in a basement (*Paradise Towers*), hospital and medics (*Smith and Jones*)... The whole thing was dialled up to fortissimo and there was no let up from the frenetic tone and pace.

Maybe I'm being too harsh. For people like me, who prefer their *Who* to be dark, gothic, violent, and frightening... Well, maybe this present version of the show just isn't for us. I'm much more enjoying the new series of Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*, which is superb on every level. And yet there's no reason why *Doctor Who* can't have that quality of writing. If we're in for a hiatus, if and when it comes back, please can the new showrunner recruit Brooker (and people of the calibre of Armando Iannucci) to the writing team?

And the overnights were two million. Oh dear. No point trying to gloss them or spin them. They're not good at all.

# Reviewed: Lux

Rick Lundeen



Subtle. Creepy. Meta. As the dust and this episode both settle in my brain, those are the words that come to mind.

I thought *Lux* was pretty solid *Doctor Who*, and the messaging was fair and subtle — it came across more as informative, a reality check.

It's 1952 Miami, so segregation is very much a part of society, and Russell T Davies, writer and showrunner, doesn't sugar-coat it; he just lays it out there. I welcome this change.

I thought the character of Mr. Ring-A-Ding was marvellously performed by Alan Cumming, and there was a great deal of care that went into all the animation, and the style of it was accurate for the time. The creepy factor was heavy here, as advertised in the trailer — it did not disappoint. We encounter yet another god from the pantheon, as Lux is the God of Light, and thinking about it, Lux could have manifested in any number of ways, but the fact that he did so through film via moonlight was, I thought, inspired.

The Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) and Belinda Chandra (Varada Sethu) getting animated,

then slowly working their way back to 3D was also well done; forcing them to be honest with each other to flesh themselves out was nice. Speaking of getting fleshed out, the creepy factor multiplied when Lux started turning 3D with ever more disturbing detail.

I feel Russell did a solid job with the story as the whole. It seemed like actual *Doctor Who*. Darker, creepier, edgier.

But now we address the elephant in the room. Or *was* there an elephant in the room? As the Doctor and Belinda continue to work their way back into reality, RTD takes advantage of the theme of what's real and what's fiction by having them pop out



of a TV screen and step into someone's living room. They then stand there and face actual *Doctor Who* fans watching the show. Thus stating categorically that the Doctor and Belinda are fictional characters.

Or are they? The fans admit that it's they who don't exist — that they're just fictional entities, part of Lux messing with our heroes' heads, and they'll probably cease to exist once their guests leave. But of course it messes with our heads too, as Russell takes the winking at the camera convention and turns the meta up to 11.

It's no secret that I've had a big problem with Russell treating *Who* like a silly little joke, with a wink and a grin. But here, he doubles down and gives the impression that there's a different fictional dimension that's way over our heads and it's all part of Lux's scheme. And, in this one instance, I do think it works only because of the story presented.

Then, as the credits run, we flip back to find that those same *Who* fans are watching them, and are now presented with a choice of opinions. Are they real fans who are watching the show from our reality, or are they still the fictional characters granted

life, who simply did not disappear once the Doctor and Belinda left? That they've now been granted an ongoing life just to watch *Doctor Who*?

Myself, I think it's the latter, considering their earlier statement, and the fact that they seem to now realise they still exist and are giddy about it!

Regarding their earlier scene, and the conversation between them and the Doctor and Belinda, the fans all choosing *Blink* as their favourite episode, while dismissing anything from RTD2 was amusing.

Finally, how did Ncuti and Varada do? Well, Ncuti didn't cry too excessively (just a little bit when the fans were explaining how they're not real), so that's something — kudos there. The "I'm Velma" comment, I'm sure, will cause teeth gnashing, but hey, Velma was the only real smart one in the gang, so better that than being the dog.

The Fifteenth Doctor's predilection for calling people "Babes" and "Babe"... You know what? The more he says it, the more it grates. Him calling Mr. Pie that sounded disrespectful. Him calling Belinda that sounds condescending and inappropriate in general. Intrusively over-familiar. He should





really stop; it's annoying.

Fashion. It's funny; historically, the Doctor usually never cared about blending in fashion-wise in the past. It happened once in a blue moon, but it wasn't the norm. Now, being a person of colour, and rarely being able to ever comfortably blend into history, he goes to great lengths to dress in era-appropriate clothes to possibly ease into society. Yet in truth, he really just likes to play dress up. When all is said and done, I suppose being a fashionista is better than being covered in question marks.

I must say, when Ncuti's got a script like this — well done, Russell — I like him more and more. It starts to get to a point where instead of him not being like the Doctor, it becomes okay for the Doctor to be more like Ncuti... which I know is heresy, but I can't help it, I like the guy (except when the "Babes" gets out of hand). He's kind of totally wrong for the Doctor, but he makes it work. Especially when the writing's good. The guy's magnetic.

Side note: Interesting that the Fifteenth Doctor referred to his energy as "bigeneration energy". He could have easily referred to it as "regeneration" energy as well, but he didn't. I hear something like that and it raises questions.

Such as, is bigeneration energy that different from regeneration energy?

If this Doctor exudes bigenergy, is that going to be significant when next he, what... bigenerates?

Will he just sprout another Doctor while he'll still go on?

Is the Fourteenth Doctor just going to be

bigenerating next time, and sprouting out another Doctor while he still goes on? Or does he just go back to regenerating into... another Fifteenth? The "real" Fifteenth? Because the Fourteenth sprouting off another Doctor would be a Fifteenth A... or a Fourteenth B...

Did Russell really think this bi-generation thing through?

But I digress.

"I topple worlds. But sometimes, I have to wait for people to topple theirs." That's a great line.

Of course we got the pop in from creepy old Mrs. Flood. I dislike her more every time I see her.

Random thoughts: I thought the method of dispatching Mr. Ring-A-Ding was simple and well done. Ending the threat by overloading it with what it wants is a bit of a cliché, but when you're dealing with gods, you do what you must. The Fifteenth Doctor has been instrumental in dispatching *four gods* from the pantheon at this point. If they ever chat amongst themselves, they might start worrying. Or teaming up to combine forces.

The other pertinent point is, okay, they bounce off May 24th, 2025. They keep trying and trying and trying (stop beating your head against the same wall, dude). Here's an idea: try May 23rd. If you still keep bouncing off, keep changing the date by a day earlier until you get success. Odds are, you might then see what's coming. Just a thought.

So. I have no doubt whatsoever that this episode is going to be hugely controversial. I'm very curious as to how this one will go over. My rating: 4 of 5, or 7.5 out of 10.



# Reviewed: The Well

Thomas Spychalski



*Doctor Who* has now been on television for more than 60 years if you add together the entire runs of what are deemed the 'classic' and 'new' eras of the programme. Naturally, between the longevity of the series and the fact that one of the key aspects of the show is time travel, you're going to get tons of references to the past.

Some are special celebration events like *The Three Doctors*, *The Five Doctors*, and *The Day of the Doctor*, which each marked a huge

anniversary and were full of nods to the series' past as well as multiple Doctors being together at one time.

Others are very subtle, like the use of the Macra in *Gridlock* during the Tenth Doctor's run in 2007. Although the Macra were by no means the main focus of that adventure, it was a nice call back to *The Macra Terror*, first broadcast in 1967.

It is always better when the past is brought up only in relevant ways, and the more cleverly weaved into the narrative it is, the more it seems to hold weight in *Doctor Who*'s fictional universe.

*The Well* certainly showcases an example of a call back done right — even a shining example of how to bring a past adversary back in exemplary fashion.

If you brought up what recurring villain may return this season to *Doctor Who*, I'd never have guessed less entity from the Tenth Doctor fan favourite episode, *Midnight*.



On its second outing, the planet once made of diamonds once again brings tension and terror along with an almost *Twilight Zone* vibe, as the faceless beast possesses (or at least stands behind) Aliss (Rose Ayling-Ellis), a cook who ended up being the survivor of a doomed mining expedition.

The horror tropes are all there on this one but it doesn't matter as it does them brilliantly and is one of the scariest *Doctor Who* episodes in quite a while.

I know the last two 'eras' of *Who* have got a lot of flack and I hate to add to it but the only part of *The Well* that had me whining was the Doctor's own propensity for tears. Now I understand the idea is that after the bi-generation the Fifteenth Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) is supposed to be free from the demons of his past and was able to heal, leaving behind a Doctor not afraid to show his feelings and able to cry when they feel sad rather than bottling it all up, but it is done way too frequently.

At this point, it's leaning toward parody in a sense as we know this scene is coming and is repeated week after week, so it seems cheap to a degree, at least in its execution..

It is always minor complaint about a series



which is much improved over last year and even though it is still early days for this year's crop of episodes, it may be the best full season of *Doctor Who* for me personally since Peter Capaldi was still in the TARDIS.

Belinda Chandra (Varada Sethu) is a much better fit for a companion so far as well, compared to Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson). Hopefully Belinda does not eventually fall into the same 'person of immense importance' trap that seems to have plagued many companions since the show's revival 20 years ago.

We will see next week when Ruby returns but I find myself not feeling her absence at all.

However, episodes like we've had the last two weeks make me hopeful that this year, we will get a really good season of *Doctor Who*... But will it be the last one for a while?



# Reviewed: Lucky Day

Philip Bates



So far, we've had the Fifteenth Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) stepping on a landmine, Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) spending a lifetime being stalked, social media and racism, Belinda Chandra (Varada Sethu) becoming animated, and the return of a scary entity on the planet of Midnight. I've liked all those stories, but *Lucky Day* is the most I've enjoyed an episode of *Doctor Who* since 2017.

I went into it tentatively. For a while, this looked like another re-tread of the past. *The Robot Revolution* was similar in tone to *Partners in Crime* and *New Earth*; *Lux* was *Tooth and Claw*; and *The Well* delighted in past glories — would *Lucky Day* just be *Love & Monsters*, done a bit better? *Doctor Who* Series 15 so far has been solid enough, but a little sad, as if trying to remind the audience of a time when *Doctor Who* was massive and great, an acknowledgement that we're creeping forwards into an uncertain future, waiting for something better to come along. It's like it's tiding us over. That's what *Lucky*

*Day* appeared to be too. Conrad Clark (Jonah Hauer-King) met the Doctor when he was young and became fascinated with him; so much so that he's dedicated a considerable amount of his life to being within touching distance of the Time Lord's sometimes horrifying life. He is Elton Pope, by another name. Or so it seems.

Conrad is a little dull. He's likeable though, and I suspect how much you invest in the episode, and stick with it without tuning out or turning over, depends on your reaction to seeing Ruby again. I like Ruby enough to be glad that she's come back. Anyone who found the episode boring likely isn't especially pleased to see her return. It was a bold gamble because a casual audience might easily change channel. This is exacerbated by the audience rightly guessing that Conrad didn't drink the antidote that would've bumped him off the Shreek's menu. Of course he's not going to have taken it. He says it's because he wants to prove himself; at one point, I suspected it was solely so he could meet the Doctor.



That's probably what Elton would've done.

Ah, but this episode is all about the twist.

The enemy this week isn't the boogey man or a god or a devil-goblin. It's a bitter man who can't face reality.

Pete McTighe writes this beautifully. You can see why many think he should be the next showrunner — not least because his love of *Doctor Who* shines through. He also understands the nature of TV really well; not a shock given that he's an experienced screenwriter, not just a *Doctor Who* fan. That's why we guess that Kate Stewart (Jemma Redgrave) is going to unleash the Shreek on Conrad, and that that's okay: after pulling the rug from underneath us so spectacularly, something predictable is perfect. It's still *scary*. The emotion is still there. Because sure, Conrad's been dealt with for now (*for now*), but we've all felt his betrayal and it lingers.

Why is it so hard-hitting? Yes, the writing and acting from all involved, but I'd also like to highlight Peter Hoar's direction. There's a lovely sequence with Conrad having drinks with Ruby: it's shot and lit very intimately, with each character facing the camera during their respective dialogue, letting us look into our eyes too, letting Conrad lie to our faces. Hoar is a fantastic director — as evidenced not just on his previous *Doctor Who*, *A Good Man Goes to War*, but also

across numerous high-profile programmes like *Daredevil*, *It's a Sin*, and *Cloak and Dagger* — and we're lucky he's given his talents to Doccy Whom.

He also manages the impossible and makes that big, hospital-like, cold and empty TARDIS set look warm; welcoming yet moody. The Doctor isn't in this episode





much, and while I don't think there's any good justification for having *another* Doctor-lite episode (that's three across two heavily truncated seasons), this time, it's for the better. He's annoyed me in previous weeks, acting very uncharacteristically, but this time, he's got grit. He's threatening and rather horrible, something we've not seen from Ncuti before. I love his pointing out essentially that some people are important because they're *not* important. That in itself is noteworthy. Yes, it's nice to hear your time-travelling hero say that everyone is special, but he doesn't act like it. What about the doomed Ross in *Into the Dalek*? Or Mike Smith in *Remembrance of the Daleks*? Or even that often-remembered (at least by the fans) caveman whose head he was going to cave in with a rock in *An Unearthly Child*? In *Lucky Day*, the Doctor tells Conrad that he is nothing. I guess we'll see how greatly Conrad disagrees in *Wish World*/ *The Reality War*...

Either way, the Doctor isn't the only one showing considerable grit. Step forward Kate Stewart! I love Kate, but she's not always been written very well. Russell T Davies has handled her a bit better than Chris Chibnall and Steven Moffat (I'm a huge fan of the latter, but he did make UNIT a bit stupid, especially in *The Magician's Apprentice*). But McTighe gives me a lot of hope for upcoming spin-off, *The War Between the Land and the Sea*. I like it when Kate proves herself cut from the same cloth as her father, the man who bombed the titular creatures in *Doctor Who and the Silurians*. Kate is firing on all cylinders.

Ruby, however, isn't. She's on the back foot throughout, and her talk about PTSD gives us one such reason, not forgetting, of course, that Conrad dug his knife in deep. Millie is excellent, but in the past, Ruby's not really been interesting enough. She's grown

since leaving the Doctor, although largely as she's still dealing with the ramifications of travelling with him. That gives her character. That makes her more engaging. It somehow feels acceptable that she doesn't do a great deal in *Lucky Day*, except save Conrad — she rescues him from the Shreek and proves herself better than him. That's enough. That's more than enough.

Despite loving *Lucky Day*, I do have quibbles. The Doctor's speech at the end felt a bit preachy again, and it wasn't needed — we all know what type of person Conrad is, what type of person he's based on, so we don't need a diatribe about the folk who buy into "fake news" narratives. It's patronising and a staple of Davies' second tenure as showrunner. Similarly, I'm not sure Conrad's *raison d'être* is justified; the Doctor promised him a lucky day, but that never came, highlighted by his abusive mother. If he's bitter that the Doctor decided not to take him travelling with him, that would be more understandable; as is, the second time Conrad saw the Doctor, he didn't approach him, so his bitterness carrying him forwards through the years feels a tad forced. (We didn't need those references to meeting the Beatles either: absolutely bring up some of your greatest hits, but not *The Devil's Chord*, one of the worst episodes I've ever seen.)



And would the sort of people who back Conrad believe the denouement? No, they'd say it's all special effects and fiendish ploys. Once the idea that UNIT is a lie and a waste of taxpayers' money is planted in the general public's mind, a live stream of an alien attack isn't going to swing things. Let's hope it means UNIT steps back into the shadows for subsequent appearances.

Despite those minor issues, *Lucky Day* remains one of the best episodes of the Fifteenth Doctor era — perhaps even since the heady days of the Twelfth Doctor...

# Reviewed: The Story & the Engine

Ida Wood



*The Story & the Engine* is simultaneously an episode of *Doctor Who* which can be a rewarding watch that captures the essence of the show, and also an on-screen reflection of what's going wrong off-screen in this era.

First of all, it ticks the boxes of taking its audience to new places and telling a new type of story, but when this is supposed to be a high-stakes game it is instead yet another tale that feels more befitting of *The Sarah Jane Adventures*.

It truly felt like watching a television adaptation of a children's book. Which is of course a staple genre of British television itself, normally as part of the Christmas scheduling, and arguably where what was essentially a bottle episode belongs since its contribution to the series' ongoing plot will probably only be noticeable retrospectively once this eight-episode run concludes.

Talking of minor contributions, there are cameos from both Mrs Flood and the wonderful Fugitive Doctor, but both are so brief (three and 13 seconds respectively) that they don't actually reveal more about those characters. The Fugitive Doctor is actually delivering lines being spoken by

Ncuti Gatwa's Fifteenth Doctor referring back to herself. So they're not even her words, and seemingly the current Doctor now can remember that incarnation's life.

With the Disney budget available, neither the intense busyness of Nigeria's capital city or the barber shop itself is convincingly captured through set design, and the TARDIS set continues to look like an abstract show home rather than an immense time machine ("red lighting means danger" is all we really see it do in this one), which is a huge letdown. It's thanks to the decisions of director Makalla McPherson, casting director Andy Pryor, Murray Gold's music, and most importantly the work of costume, hair, and make-up artists that this story can successfully translate from script to screen.

In the credits, the crew includes a Lagos unit, but the BBC has not mentioned any filming in Nigeria and it does not sell the show to a broadcaster in the country anymore. If public service broadcasting was the barber shop in this episode, then the new management controlling the distribution of storytelling is Disney.

Remember those old episodes that were



discovered in Nigeria? It was literally front page news, then became a rather messy and prolonged tale about how, if, and when those stories could be shared with everyone. The stories had a very different value to fans compared to some of those handling the discovery, transportation, and distribution of the lost episodes.

Anyway, back to *The Story & the Engine*. The short story that acts as a prequel to this episode is a great read, and it sets up Omo as the individual who is going to the heart of proceedings. But on-screen, this man who has an existing relationship with the Doctor and previously ran the barber shop is basically shuffled to the side along with the others stuck in the building.

Instead, it's the new boss, played by Ariyon Bakare, who becomes the centre of the story and then Abena (Michelle Asante). Thankfully, both performances are absolutely incredible: the Barber gets some amazing dialogue, and Abena can say so little yet draw so much attention from the viewer. Both bounce off the Doctor well, whether in direct confrontation, when they're showing off, or even when they're just watching him in silence.

How the Barber is introduced is a clever bit of camerawork, as his lower half is seen first then more is shown before eventually reaching his head. It primes the audience in that brief moment for the expectation of seeing a rather villainous-looking individual, since his face is not shown first, and then it turns out he's just a slightly mysterious and charismatic-looking guy. But thanks to a directing decision, and the Barber's smile, we know not to trust him.

While the hustle and bustle of Lagos isn't truly realised, the change in lighting and soundscape for when the Doctor and Belinda go down side streets and then into the barber shop creates the contrast needed to make it seem like they're a world away from a busy city.

There's some continuity errors, such as the Fugitive Doctor cameo (and dialogue referring to being black for the first time) and the Doctor's recollection of Belinda's encounter with Mrs Flood, but the educational elements in the plot are great and the usage of maps braided into hair to navigate an escape route is an inspired inclusion. I can't imagine any other show bar a pure historical drama about the slave trade using that as a plot beat. The moments where characters' hair grows after telling stories is also a funky detail.

It's hard to rate this episode, because it probably hits very differently for a young child full of imagination (every time 'feed it a story' was uttered, it felt like being in a nursery-age storytime group at a library) than it does an adult who is invested more in seeing where the Doctor and Belinda go as the show's leads rather than literally the places they go.

I hope this episode reaches audiences, through word of mouth, who would not typically watch the show but the scene about having a six-word story felt more like a drive to make something for TikTok than a plot beat.

Overall, it's a refreshing take on *Doctor Who* from Inua Ellams, proving once again in this era that the show gets more new ideas when writers other than the showrunner are penning the scripts, and a story set in Africa was very long overdue. Some of what was packaged in could have been handled better, and the ending essentially said *Doctor Who* is a never-ending story (a fourth-wall break done three episodes prior) with never-ending power, to be enjoyed by all rather than told only at the whim of gods (or corporate overlords, or political sabotaging of the UK's media industry). A sentiment to hold on to with a likely wait of several years for another series.

# Reviewed: The Interstellar Song Contest

Peter Shaw



"It's hard to latch on to exactly what they're selling when you're too busy reeling from the constant whiplash of hearing an almost brand new thing every 30 seconds. Although I've been able to settle into the story over time, and now appreciate the theatricality of it all, first impressions matter..."

This is a slightly adapted quote from 'seasoned *Eurovision* watcher' Jonathan Vautrey's review of the UK's 2025 *Eurovision* entry, *What the Hell Just Happened* by Remember Monday. [For 'thing', read 'song', and for 'story', read 'entry'.]

And I quote it, not to be a smart arse (although, perhaps a little), but because it's a neat summary of *The Interstellar Song Contest*. It was jam-packed in the way that jam is packed into a very full jam jar full of jammy goodness. As if Bonne Maman had tried to cram all 23 of its different flavours into one glass container.

There was humour, camp, songs, speeches, loss, love, anger, jealousy, rage, injustice, redemption, violence, hugs, smiles, revelations, call backs, rebirths, celebrities, aliens, humans, and Rylan. And Susan Foreman. Note: her 'adopted' name, nicked

from a sign on a junkyard. "Susan who? What's he talking about?"

There were startling moments: the aforementioned return of the Doctor's granddaughter, the two Ranis at the end. But most of all, the Doctor's rage. His torturing of Freddie Fox's Kid, despite the fact that he threatened to callously kill trillions of people, hit a sour note. Not sufficiently dealt with in this episode, I rather hope the 'ice' that's been put in the Doctor's heart (note: not hearts) is resolved, or at least referenced in the final episodes.

It flies in the face of criticism that the Fifteenth Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) is too weak and emotional. This time, he was too strong and emotional. Tears of rage rather than sentiment. But let's not forget this is not a human being; he walks in eternity.

Think of the First Doctor threatening to throw Ian and Barbara off the ship in *The Edge of Destruction* and the Second Doctor using Jamie as an experiment in *The Evil of the Daleks*. There are many more in the classic series, and in the revived — think of the Ninth torturing a Dalek in, uhm, *Dalek*, and the Tenth drowning the Empress of the

Racnoss and all her children in *The Runaway Bride*. Again, I could go on... You can see Belinda Chandra (Varada Sethu) looking at him with new eyes at the end of the episode, despite the Doctor excusing his actions as being triggered by trauma.

And it's confusing what trauma the Doctor is talking about. "I scared myself," he says. "The death of three trillion people triggered me. It made me think of my home planet. 'Cause they all died. In a single second. Every last Time Lord."



But wasn't that the first 'destruction' of Gallifrey in the Time War, and wasn't that resolved in *The Day of the Doctor*? I know the trauma of believing that event happened could be triggering. But wouldn't it be more triggering if he were thinking of the Master's destruction of Gallifrey and the Time Lords as revealed in *Spyfall* Part II, and all because of the Doctor's origins? Presumably, the Master didn't destroy it all in one second. It feels jarring, considering Russell T Davies is so determined to continue with the Timeless Child arc.

Apart from some of these concerns and confusions, I really enjoyed this episode. I'm sure that many people hearing the title and seeing the preview would have been worried that it would actually be a song contest with the Doctor and Belinda enjoying the show with a bit of jeopardy thrown in. Rather, it was the background to a politically-charged adventure that quickly upped the drama away from the main stage. And if it were a song contest, Murray Gold definitely won out against a rather lacklustre set of entries for *Eurovision* later that night. In a bit of meta role-reversal, maybe the *Doctor Who* composer should pen the UK's song contest entry for 2026.

We're getting used to the reveal of hidden

renegade Time Lords, ever since the Master came back in *Utopia*. Then Missy in *Dark Water*, and once again, 'O' being the Master in the aforementioned *Spyfall*. It's hard to distinguish what difference it will make having the Rani as an enemy rather than the Master, particularly as Missy was literally a female version of the character. I hope we see some motivation beyond wanting to destroy the universe and/or the Doctor, as is the Master's bent. Otherwise, it could just as easily have been the Master rather than the Rani. Clearly, there is some kind of power dynamic between the new Rani and Miss Flood, with the latter being strangely subservient, "Here, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am..."

As for the Doctor and the strange reappearance of his granddaughter, Susan... We've already had the double bluff of her non-appearance at the last series' conclusion. But then there was that (clearly portentous) exchange with Kate Lethbridge-Stewart in *The Legend of Ruby Sunday*:

KATE: If you've got a granddaughter, that means you've got kids.

DOCTOR: Well, not quite. Not yet.

KATE: But... You mean... you can have a granddaughter before a daughter?

DOCTOR: Life of a Time Lord.

So, let's get this straight. The Doctor has a granddaughter but hasn't had kids yet. But will in the future. But all the Time Lords are dead. Hang on, except one. Well, two, strictly speaking. The Rani. The Doctor and the Rani? The Doctor and the Rani? You know, hanky panky in the TARDIS. That's a universe that doesn't bear thinking about.

Until next time. Hide behind your sofas, viewers. Be careful what you wish for. This could be an interesting ride...



# Reviewed: Wish World

Frank Danes



When Philip, the editor of the DWC, asked me to review this episode, I said I would focus as much as possible on the positives and the things I liked: *that would be the first twenty words taken care of, Philip*, said I! Ha ha. Jesters do oft prove prophets.

But this review is straight from the heart, and was written immediately after I had watched *Wish World*, before the dust had time to settle, before I watched it a second time to see if I would revise my opinions.

What was good about the penultimate episode of *Doctor Who* Series 15? Well, there were excellent special effects and design. I liked the skeletal dinosaur things, the Rani's bone palace, the Rani's leather jacket, the 1950s suburban kitchen, *The Truman Show* suburbia design. I liked the shot of the Doctor – sorry, John Smith – and Belinda in bed together, the wholesome married couple, with the cute little girl. I quite liked UNIT being rethought into a 1940s insurance company. (Haven't we had the Doctor as human before, with no memory

of his previous life, in *Human Nature/The Family of Blood*? Isn't a show raiding its back catalogue a sign of a show in trouble? Silence, doubter!) I liked the alternative version of Shirley. Oh, and I liked the clips and the cameo of Susan because they reminded me of a time when *Doctor Who* used to be good. Whoops. Silence, doubter!

There were some good ideas. If this was Conrad's wish world, then it was Far Right world: the disabled and disadvantaged ignored, only heterosexual lifestyles allowed, no dissent from the party line permitted. Did I enjoy much else? Um... nope.

The bits I enjoyed in *Wish World* were mostly those bits which referenced things I liked better than this episode of *Doctor Who*. (Indeed, was it even an episode of *Doctor Who*? My wife said she thought she was watching another show entirely, and I agree with her. This was Davies *Who*, an entirely



different show, based on a programme called *Doctor Who* but far, far superior.) Neighbours and family members shopping their nearest and dearest because they doubted Conrad, Conrad as Big Brother – straight out of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Beaming, conforming citizens doing meaningless tasks – straight out of *The Prisoner*. *The Hell Dimension* – Season 4 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I like Orwell, *Buffy*, and *The Prisoner* very much. Much more than I like Davies *Who*.

Alas, I found my attention wandering for much of *Wish World* and thought it was – how shall I put it? Ah yes: boring, loud, incomprehensible drivel. I hate it that magic has now embedded itself so firmly into *Doctor Who*. Christopher H Bidmead once said he didn't want to be script editor of Tom Baker's final season because he hated the way magic had intruded into the programme. Presumably, he was thinking of the Doctor and Romana talking about using their Time Lord Superman powers – huh? – to fly down from the Eiffel Tower in *City of Death*; John Nathan-Turner assured him that the new season would be science fiction, not magical fantasy, and Bidmead climbed aboard. Now we have magic rooted in *Doctor Who* with a vengeance. You might say, aha, it's not really magic because the pantheon of gods from beyond the universe are beings we don't understand and they have powers that are like magic but it's not really magic – but it looks awfully like magic to me. The teaser sequence had the Rani blow on people, turning the mother into violets and the children into ducks. Not magic? It was straight out of the Brothers Grimm. I thought *Doctor Who* was basically a science fiction programme? Silence, doubter! This is Davies *Who*, not to be confused with *Doctor Who*, and only his

rules – the rules of Davies, god of chaos – apply.

I thought Archie Punjabi underplayed the Rani and I found myself nostalgic for Kate O'Mara's scene-chewing melodrama. At least Kate O'Mara's conviction and energy helped to make poor scripts watchable, but Punjabi and Dobson were just... dull. And Conrad, a disturbing and real villain in *Lucky Day*, was now just holding the baby and looking (like most viewers?) a bit bewildered, wondering what on Earth was going on.

Would the casual or/and new viewer know who the Rani is? You know, the casual or/and new viewer that Disney wants to hook if it is to renew the series? Davies explained in *Wish World* that the Rani was an evil Time Lady, and she and the Doctor had possibly been lovers (I quite liked that idea), but, as an evil female Time Lady without much characterisation, she might as well have been the Master/Missy.



Oh! And the Rani is going to destroy reality and bring back Omega! Does the casual/new viewer remember who Omega is? Come on, keep up, casual/new viewer, you should remember back to 1973 and 1982, *The Three Doctors* and *Arc of Infinity*. Oh dear, oh dear. Watch the back catalogue, for heaven's sake! Gary Gillatt wrote that, every now and then, *Doctor Who* reverts back to a "low energy" state, which he defines as people in Time Lord collars shouting that the Tachyon Barrier is about to collapse! The ultimate example of this, according to Gillatt and quoting Mark Gatiss, is in fact the end of an episode of *Arc of Infinity*, when the Doctor shouts that Omega controls the Matrix! And the casual/new viewer says, who is Omega, what is the Matrix, why does it matter that he controls

it? And switches off. And so the whirligig of time brings in his revenges, and here we are, with the Rani (who?) shouting that they are going to resurrect Omega (who?).

*Wish World* did not tell a comprehensible story, with a beginning, middle, and end. I found that that which was supposed to be intriguing – why is the Doctor now married? Why can't he remember his history? – went on for far too long. Who was the guy reaching out of the hell dimension to tell the Doctor that tables weren't supposed to do that? Was he Rogue from *Rogue*? I can't actually remember what Rogue looked like and didn't recognise the actor in medium shot; nor, by this point, did I really care what was going on. (I only found out he was indeed Rogue by reading DWC later in the evening.) Ho hum. The roses outside my window distracted me while I was watching. They are very pretty at this time of year. I should tie that clematis back. Hang on, the Ranis are saying something; better tune back in to Davies *Who* — the Ranis might be giving us more exposition. And they were!

*Wish World* was all very pretty. It had lots of nice imagery and design, and pounding music to underscore the significance of everything. Bish, bash, bosh, goes Murray

Gold and the orchestra! What are the characters saying? I can't hear them but it doesn't matter as it's gobbledegook anyway. Maybe Davies believes spectacle – his love of big imagery and stupendous design – is sufficient to paper over the chasms in his writing and the holes in his plot, so who cares if nothing makes sense? If you don't like Davies *Who*, "good luck" to you, says Davies – his code for an Anglo-Saxon salutation. All will be revealed next week and all the loose ends will be tied up, Davies chortles. I don't believe him.

Watching *Wish World* this evening, I felt exactly as I did when watching the last season of Sylvester McCoy in 1989. Back in 1989, I thought *Doctor Who* had some interesting ideas, good designs, and entertaining set pieces – but no coherent stories and precious few engaging characters. *Wish World* made me feel exactly the same. Immediately after watching an episode of *The Curse of Fenric* in 1989, I remember turning to a friend and saying, if that's the best you can do, you might as well cancel the show. I said exactly the same thing this evening.

Sorry. I hated *Wish World*. I thought it was noisy, incomprehensible rubbish. Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.



# Reviewed: The Reality War

Jonathan Appleton



It was tempting to label this review *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. The title of that madcap, reality-bending tale of parallel worlds nicely summed up what it felt like to watch this season finale which brought the curtain down on Ncuti Gatwa's era and (possibly?) launched the second coming of Billie Piper.

This was an episode which very much followed the Russell T Davies playbook of season finales. Big, bombastic, and full of spectacle. Multiple plot threads either left hanging or tied up in double quick time. Some quieter scenes that showcased why he's such a successful screenwriter. And brazenly cheeky moments that will either have left you cheering or howling in despair (more on those later).

No sooner are we off and running than we're reintroduced to Anita from the Time Hotel. Steph de Whalley was perhaps the best thing about 2024 Christmas episode *Joy to the World* and it's a welcome return. It turns out Anita has been looking

in on the Doctor at various points in his timeline (tell us about *The Massacre* and *The Space Pirates*, Anita) and there's a moving moment when she sees him with Rogue and understands what could never be. But I felt sad that all she got to do after that was hold a door open.

It was a similar feeling when Archie Panjabi's Rani was given a rather undignified exit halfway through the episode. If you're going to bring the Rani back, surely you might as



well make her the centrepiece of the story, but she was summarily dispensed with. I rather enjoyed Anita Dobson's unexpected *Two Ronnies* reference, though it was probably lost on anyone who wasn't watching British comedy 40+ years ago.

Jonah Hauer-King's Conrad, a character with potential and much to say about the modern world, also felt underused, although, thanks to Ruby, he had a resolution of sorts (plaudits to Millie Gibson — especially good in the episode, I thought).

And then there was Omega, the last member of the trinity. After all that build up, the mad God was very easily defeated but what felt worse was that, just like last year, a classic-era villain was revived as a CGI beast. Can't we have these enemies presented as a proper acting role for a performer to get their teeth into?

It wasn't the only echo of the previous season. We had another mysterious child, one we were led to believe held a kind of cosmic significance, but turned out to be just a regular kid. My view was that this thread, touchingly played by Gatwa and Varada Sethu, worked rather better this time. The sequence where Ruby watches,



confused and horrified, as the Doctor and Belinda pass the jacket between them was Davies at his best. It did feel a bit of a cheat to show all those previously unseen clips of Belinda saying she needed to get back for Poppy, though. Surely we should have had some clues along the way, instead of time being rewritten like that?

There was almost too much to take in with one viewing. When Jodie Whittaker's Thirteenth Doctor turned up in the TARDIS I can't have been alone in half-expecting her to be followed by some combination of Tennant, Smith, Capaldi, and Martin. It was good to see her again, though, and did anyone else think that if her Doctor had been written more like she was in this short





appearance, her era would be more fondly remembered?

It was clear by now that, as had been suspected, this episode would indeed be the Fifteenth Doctor's last hurrah. Ncuti Gatwa was never less than a charismatic, engaging presence in the role and gave us some great moments. It's no mean feat for an actor to deliver a line like this episode's 'She's provoking the bone beasts!' and sound credible. But I'm left with a feeling that his short tenure is somehow incomplete with aspects (such as his loss of control in *The Interstellar Song Contest*) that went undeveloped.

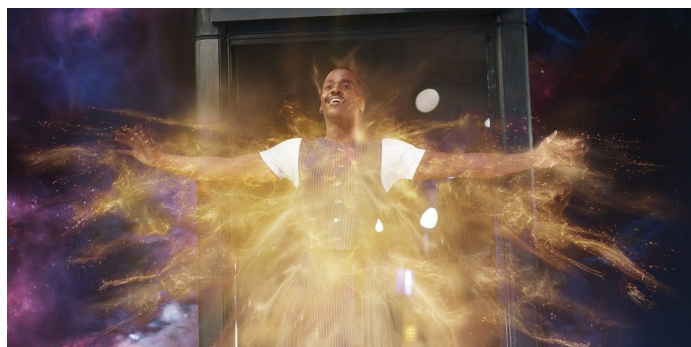
Speculation prior to transmission focussed more on how *The Reality War* would end than the content of the episode itself. Would the Doctor wander off into the sunset as in *Survival*? Or would the credits roll partway through the regeneration?

When it came, there was a huge surprise in store (I'm pleased to say I avoided spoilers). I have to say I laughed and can't help admiring the audacious move of having Billie Piper appear. This won't be a universal view, but I can absolutely understand why the production team would choose to bring back one of modern *Doctor Who*'s breakout

stars.

All in all, *The Reality War* was a finale that had me both infuriated and enthralled, often in the same scene. I find it's best with this kind of episode to take from it what you can, sit back, and let the wave wash over you. But I can well understand that won't be an approach that suits everyone.

A veteran of soap opera, RTD has always held to the mantra, 'never end the story' and so it proved here. We may be in for a long wait to see what happens next. I can't claim any insight into what the future holds between the BBC and Disney, though from the amount of attention that ending has garnered, both favourable and unfavourable, I'd have to say this doesn't feel like a programme that won't return.



# Exclusive: Baz Greenland Talks About His New Doctor Who Christmas Specials Book

Philip Bates

There's no festive *Doctor Who* episode this year, but you can still feel Christmassy, by checking out Candy Jar Books' *Doctor Who Christmas Specials: Twenty Years of Festive Adventures*.

Edited by Baz and Ben Greenland, the book covers every Christmas and New Year's special from *The Christmas Invasion* to *Joy to the World* — and then some!

We caught up with Baz to find out more!

**First of all, do you have a favourite Christmas special yourself?**

There are lots of great options, but for me, nothing beats *A Christmas Carol*. Matt Smith is wonderful in this story, while Michael Gambon is pitch perfect as the Scrooge-like Kazran. Katherine Jenkins is also a revelation, with her vocal talents put to amazing use. An adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* was always ripe for *Doctor Who* to explore, and with Steven Moffat's writing talents, the real magic happens. It's timey wimey, very funny, heartbreaking, and heartwarming. It even has the great visual of a shark swimming through the air! And most importantly, it is just so Christmassy. Few specials give me that festive feeling quite like *A Christmas Carol*.

**How did this book come about?**

It was actually a pitch from Candy Jar editor, Shaun Russell. He had liked what I had done with *UNIT: A Legacy in Doctor Who*, and spent a very fun few weeks watching every special with his family over the festive period. With *The Christmas Invasion* (and modern *Doctor Who*) celebrating its 20th anniversary, the time felt right to explore the legacy of the *Doctor Who* Christmas – and New Year's Day – specials and I was excited to take up the challenge.

The biggest challenge of all was, in true *Doctor Who* fashion, watching and writing about Christmas specials in the height of summer. There was one day



where I was at the beach in the morning, and then put on *Twice Upon a Time* in the afternoon!

**It's quite a monumental task: how did you approach it? The idea of bringing in numerous writers to enthuse about each episode is a great idea by the way, giving lots of different voices to the book.**

I took each special one at a time. I would watch the episode and then spend time researching the development, history, and legacy of the episode online. For any non-fiction book, research is key. I spend as much time reading about the episodes as I do writing about them! But then, armed with that research, I would then dive into the chapters, telling a story to make it more

engaging. What was the state of *Doctor Who* at a time? Had a companion just left? Was a regeneration pending? These events often shaped the writing of these specials. I would then explore the filming, the critical reception, and how they connected to the specials that preceded them. I want the readers to go on a journey, feel engaged, and be entertained as much as learning something new about the specials they love.

These specials have such a legacy that I wanted to hear from other voices too. I know plenty of *Doctor Who* fans who also happen to be writers and critics, and so I thought it would be great to hear their thoughts in the book too. Because Ben and I were focused on the development, legacy, and critical reception, it would be hard to switch our voice to offer a more personal opinion and reflection of what these specials meant to us (though I still feel our voices come through). The concept was that once Ben and I had presented what each special was about, a guest writer would come in and write a personal, reflective essay that celebrates these stories.

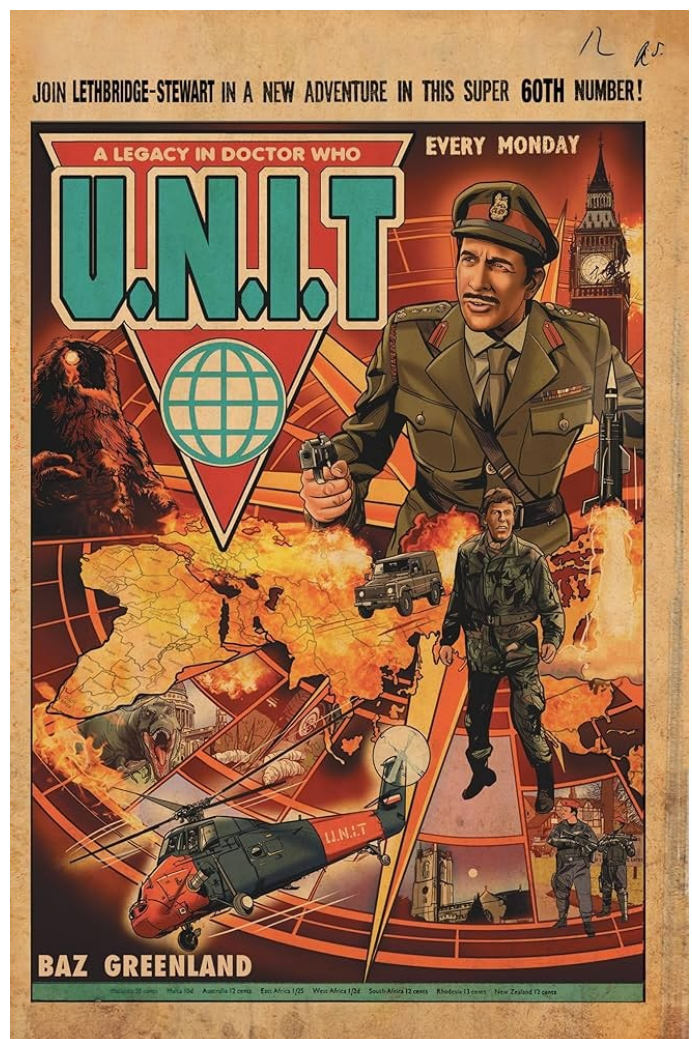
And I absolutely love these essays. They're funny, emotional, and offer perspectives that we might not have considered. I loved getting new essays as the project drew on, and adding them to the book's journey as we moved from one special to the next. They help to tell the story of 20 years of *Doctor Who* Christmas specials, and give the book a magical touch.

### What was it like working with your son?

Ben is the BIGGEST *Doctor Who* fan I know. He's watched every episode, every reconstruction, he's read numerous books and comics, and listened to countless Big Finish audios. He really knows his stuff! Anyone who talks to him is just blown away by his passion and knowledge of *Doctor Who*! And that's why we do a podcast – *The TARDIS Crew* – together. There are numerous *Doctor Who* podcasts out there, but what I think makes ours so special is Ben's knowledge and our father-son dynamic.

And so, when it came to writing my second non-fiction *Doctor Who* book for Candy Jar, I knew I wanted to bring that passion and knowledge into the project, while giving him the opportunity to be published. It wasn't

always easy; he's now in his second year at university, so a lot of the discussions were done over WhatsApp, or when he was home for the holidays, but we immediately vibed on what we wanted the book to be about. Ben would take one special for each Doctor and follow the same approach as I had done – watching, researching, and writing – though he knows *Doctor Who* so well, the difficulty was not obtaining interesting insights, but backing up that vast *Doctor Who* database in his brain with references that we could connect to in what became our extensive chapter notes for the book!



### You've got some amazing interviews in there too — how did those come about? And any highlights?

I think there are three magic ingredients to this book. First, the father-son dynamic of writing this book together. Secondly, the amazing essays from all the different writers, offering fresh voices. And finally, the interviews with the four different *Doctor Who* directors. After all, it's so much easier to explore the development



accessible and not throwaway to the fans who stick with the show every series or season. But it also needs to be accessible to the casual viewer, who's had three Baileys, half a turkey and six mince pies, and maybe only watched the show last Christmas. It's a fine balance, and some festive specials are more successful than others.

But the thing I've reflected on, while writing this book – and I think Ben will agree – is that they need to be heartfelt. They need to make you happy, maybe a little bit sad, and leave you feeling a little bit joyful. And Christmassy. Sometimes that's very in your face, like killer Christmas trees, but sometimes it can just be the vibe. Maybe it's my love of *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, but any special that looks like it's come out of a snowy Victorian London is usually the one that I will connect with the most!

**And, in a similar fashion to *A Christmas Carol* and *The Doctor, the Widow and the Wardrobe*, are there any stories — be they films, books, whatever — that you think could work well, if given the *Doctor Who* makeover?**

I love this question!

**[Laughs] Thanks, Baz!**

I'd love to see *Doctor Who* take on some Roald Dahl. The Doctor meets the Twits or concocts *George's Marvellous Medicine*? But maybe that's too silly? I love that Moffat went for two perfect classics, two years in a row. I'm sure there are plenty of Victorian ghost stories they can adapt. Maybe Dickens' *The Signal-Man*?



**A big thank you to Baz! *Doctor Who Christmas Specials: Twenty Years of Festive Adventures* and *UNIT: A Legacy in Doctor Who* are both available now from Candy Jar Books.**

of these specials when you can actually talk to people involved in.

You always want to get some great interviews for your book. The process requires a lot of patience and gumption, approaching agents and contacts, and hoping someone bites. Fortunately, the four directors – Farren Blackburn, Saul Metzstein, Paul Wilmschurst, and Douglas Mackinnon – all bit! They were all very approachable and willing to share their stories, not just about these specials, or even the other *Doctor Who* episodes they had written, but their wider careers as well. The four interviews were done over Zoom on a very hot and sunny August, which feels typical of the behind-the-scenes creation of any festive episode. Hearing them talk about the challenges of working with snow, but also what it is like working with Matt Smith, Peter Capaldi, Jenna Coleman, and Alex Kingston, was a real joy!

**What do you think makes a perfect festive *Doctor Who*?**

This is a very hard question, and one I try to answer in the book. It needs to feel

# Reviewed: Big Finish's Festive Torchwood — Reflect

Ida Woods



The most Christmas-y release from Big Finish's output in December 2024 was a *Torchwood* Monthly Range release that was an anthology of ghostly tales, the type you may tell the family during festive times... although in this instance, Dorothy McShane and Mr Colchester share tales of egotism, the difficulties of trust, and how dangerous it was to be a gay man in 20th Century Britain.

The pairing is a proven one, although in this instance they are monologuing their stories so there are only a few moments of the duo interacting and you can tell they know each

other well, and care for each other too, in each of those.

A gap-filling story of how Dorothy – then Ace – first encountered the Torchwood Institute in 1880 while travelling with the Seventh Doctor is the opening tale and is set in and around the newly built Natural History Museum. It is where Ace feels able to be quiet and at peace rather than loud and angry, but then she is interrupted by a ghost-vanquishing and trouser-wearing lady named Amelia Thornton. She works for the Queen, and, without naming the establishment she actually works for, does

admit she basically sacrificed one of her colleagues and now believes they may be haunting the museum.

As with most 19th Century encounters with the institute, it soon turns into a tale of them wanting to face off with the Doctor. To say any more would be spoilers.

It's Colchester's turn next to share a story, and the one-night stands and Soho setting that kicks off his tale places this firmly during the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Although there is a science-fiction element, this is mostly a heart-wrenching recollection of "that evil disease" as it is referred to and an incredibly difficult period during his life and those around him at the time.

In the 1980s, he was a soldier, the most masculine setting and possibly trauma-filled job to have anyway, but also waking up blacked out in various places and without possessions or nutrition. Eventually, one Christmas, he reaches Sergeant Benjamin Staveley, a man who knows of Colchester's homosexuality and did not punish him for it during service.

Unfortunately, what follows is too good to be true, and it's a hard-hitting reminder of how savage that decade was for gay people and how desperate many felt at their lowest points. Paul Clayton does an incredible job of delivering this story while crying, and it does get really scary. It's also Colchester's own introduction to the activities of Torchwood.

He is curious about the first director of the institute, Ms Thornton, and Dorothy refers to her centuries-old diary for some character insight. And posh voices. Lots of mimicking posh voices.

Mirrors with talking, manipulative reflections follows the theme of all these stories being reflective, and Amelia offloads her trauma to the mirror as she continues to dwell on one of the first things she did in her job: making a colleague die. Anyone who's read Dickens, or more likely watched *The Muppets' Christmas Carol*, will find the rest of the tale a familiar listen, and there are some humorous elements to match that and also raise spirits after the sensitive subject matter of the preceding tale.

Colchester takes over again for the final

story, which is a bit of a sequel but more of a commentary on the vanity of contemporary culture rather than Victorian London. There's a mention of Palestine and other topics that usually appear on people's X (formerly Twitter) feeds before focusing on a selfie trend involving a woman who appears in the corner of selfies. Again, a reflection of self.

The trend becomes viral, with people deliberately scaring themselves as they seek to take a selfie which this unusual woman will appear in. She even becomes a Hallowe'en outfit choice. Nobody seems to be bothered that some who took selfies featuring her go on to die in unexplained ways. There's then a twist, which connects the tale to the others and brings Dorothy and Colchester more directly into proceedings.

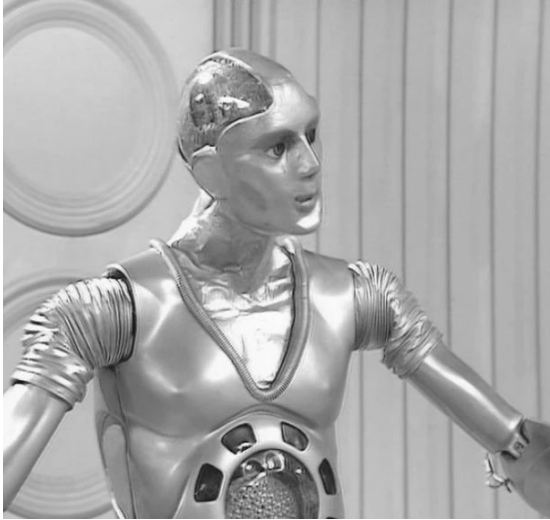
Big Finish's annual free *Torchwood* story was *A Christmas Card from Mr Colchester*, which also came as an extra on *Reflect*. It follows the usual format of Colchester monologuing about something he finds a bit frustrating or he'd rather avoid doing, and in this instance, it's the big family letter that people send or receive at Christmas. Maybe the families sending them don't exist... and the deliveries actually form part of a psychic alien weapon that involves more and more unsuspecting people every year...

***Reflect* and *A Christmas Card from Mr Colchester* are both available from Big Finish now!**



# The Sum of My Parts

Graham Clements



I'm not even close to being the Doctor today.

At best, my performance is wooden; although I try to say the lines as normal, there's little conviction in their delivery. Systems have the nerve to report that I'm working to full capacity, but the darlings obviously don't have a clue as to what's going on or perhaps, they're simply trying not to hurt one's feelings.

I fear that even the most primitive of audiences would be hard pushed to believe in my current portrayal of the man, which I might add, is due to a general lack of direction from people other than my good self!

The Master already knows that I'll carry the weight of the whole production without a single word of complaint. But is my suffering acknowledged? Am I thanked for changing the drivel that laughingly passes for script? Is my ego occasionally massaged by an ovation of the standing kind?

I think not.

Thank heavens for rehearsals, the chance to turn disaster into mediocrity, or if you're unlucky, heartfelt angst into comedy. Those few solitary hours before a performance really can make all the difference. Gestures can be made more natural, dialogue tweaked, and emotion shown with the merest inclination of the head. I do so love the craft that's involved in becoming someone else, and to be honest, playing the Doctor is infinitely preferable to being me.

Don't we all wish that we were him? Can you even imagine it!

To have the wit and wisdom, just for a few hours, to change things for the better. You could make a difference in the universe, save some lives along the way, and do a million things that have never been done before.

Not that I have any choice in the matter, you understand, for my circuits were designed to give the illusion of incarnations past, right up to the increasingly popular present, while programming has made me little more than a slave to those who wish me to perform.

Isn't technology both marvellous and utterly, utterly depressing?

At least my mind is back on the job. I sit in the cupboard that I refer to, without the slightest hint of irony, as my dressing room. The face that looks back at me from the cracked mirror is old and very wise. My hair is white, my temper short, and my teeth are rather bad. I am about to instigate some treaty that will lay the foundations for peace within an entire system. I have the old man's movements down to an unhurried, almost regal pace, and my voice has the required mixture of mischief and authority that suited the Doctor of this period.

Everything seems to be ready, and a feeling of confidence has registered within my Higher Brain. Then from nowhere, the same old memory surfaces from the depths, and I'm left with the usual despair.

Try as I might, it refuses to go away, niggling just below the surface, making demands to play back every hurtful image of that terrible, terrible night. Dear Maker, the heat and those screams, I'll never forget those screams.

Was it only a month ago, that we were on Apona?

I thank the gods, real or imagined, for the one good thing and close my eyes.

*Come on, snap out of it! Stop being such an old ham!* You know that certain memories always cause a melodrama in your system. Keep yourself busy, avoid that unfathomable tendency of flicking through the old data files when you're resting, and for heaven's sake don't switch to analytical.

For a while, I feel a little calmer. My dressing room is quiet, except for the ever-present hum of what I take to be the heart of this craft. A sound that's by no means overpowering to my sensors, unlike other so called 'star' ships, where fuel systems screech imploringly as they try to provide the equivalent thrust of an exploding planet. If truth be told, most of them grant you nothing more than the snail-like crawl through space in a vessel designed with all the artistic flair of a brick.

Just take my word for it, 'star' ships are generally ghastly places. They are populated by ghastly people and their equally ghastly children, who travel about the universe with their no doubt ghastly purposes in mind. If you must travel by means of these interstellar bricks, make sure you go on a line where the cabin is large enough to comfortably lock yourself away from the thoughts of the other passengers. You might also want to look out for a captain who insists that their little brats are frozen in stasis for the duration of the trip.

The Master's TARDIS reminds me of a shark; though my Logic systems are now already arguing against the comparison, I still retain the image of that extinct predator moving effortlessly through the oceans in search of prey. A perfect machine in every sense, programmed to move, feed, and reproduce when necessary. A shark does not question its actions or analyse its existence quite simply because it's a shark.

How wonderful it must feel to be entirely free to play a role all of your own!

The chip dedicated to language in my internal store is now suggesting several thousand cross-referenced definitions connected to the matter: self, Ka, being, individuality, uniqueness, contentment, to be happy with one's lot, Ying and Yang, going solo, flying the

roost, Bill of Rights, Abolition of Slavery, peace, freedom...

I always cut the stream on 'freedom' because the word has already taken up an inordinate amount of my processing time. Higher Brain circuitry immediately interrupts my thoughts to inform me about feelings of envy and jealousy towards the shark, which I begin to agree with until Logic, may it rust to nothing for being such a frightful bore, overrides with the original hypothesis.

Then Higher Brain throws everything on its head by suggesting that I could now consider myself to be a sharp tooth in the shark's mouth. I don't need it to understand why a feeling of shame comes with the thought.

Other systems begin to add their voice to the argument, or at least, report an unrelated series of facts in respect of their own processing. Did you know that my ankle mechanism is currently at rest? I'm aware of the fact because it tells me every thousandth of a second. Similarly, my internal temperature is constant at 18 degrees: amazing, eh? And Hydraulics is now making an enquiry as to why my hands have suddenly bunched into fists. Why! Because none of you will leave me alone for a second — that's why! I can barely cope with the sound of your babble.

*Please, please, please shut up! I'm warning you, if you don't stop, I'm shutting down...*

*Okay, well if that's the way you want to play it. All systems shut down right now, do you hear, right now!*

The blessed silence is immediate. My external sound and vision processors lie dormant, while the chatter of internal mechanisms has thankfully faded away. For all intents and purposes, I am dead to the world.

I wonder if I've fallen off my chair?

Now that there's just the darkness and me, I can't see or even feel my hand in front of my face, so there's no way of knowing. The isolation is both terrifying and wonderful. It is one of those fleeting moments where I am no one else but myself. A small chip no bigger than a thumbnail, lodged behind the artificial cell generator, which fills out most of my chest cavity. This is the true sum of all my parts, the place where my dreams and nightmares lurk. Still, not the most glamorous of dressing rooms, I grant you, but the only one in the universe where the name "Kamelion" shines brightly on the door.

I'm not sure exactly how long passed before my systems suddenly began their start up sequence. Initial shock turned to fear as something tore away the silence and replaced it with an inescapable tidal wave of sound. The deluge of questions and reports that followed only added to my already confused state. What in the name of heaven was going on? I gave no such order to... then I heard the Master's voice, and I knew he was angry.

"Kamelion, awake you fool! Sleeping on the job as always!"

Terror gripped me as Visual, Audio, Logic, and every other circuit surged with energy. His commands reverberated around my body, making my own voice little more than a whisper from the bottom of a well.

"Come on! I haven't got the time, you rusty bag of bolts! We've got a show to do! I command you to wake up!"

I can see him now, standing over me, arms folded across his chest and a sour look seeping from a mouth that hangs precariously above a strong, jutting chin.

"At last," he said as the frustration receded a little from his voice. "And what's the problem this time? Don't tell me that reactor of yours is on the blink again."

"Sorry, Master. At my venerable age, you need to conserve a little energy every now and again," I reply.

"I'm thinking of running a diagnostic on you. Maybe even a full system purge. We don't want any more... *outbursts*."

He settles back lithely into a high-backed chair before dictating his wishes. I knew them already and so happily drifted along for a while.

"So, just hit your marks and deliver those lines when I give you the nod."

"It sounds a most ingenious of plans, Master," I lied.

"Any fool could do it," he snapped. "I sometimes wonder why I bother! They're almost as stupid as you, Kamelion."

"Then, why do it?" I asked with a well-practised nonchalance.

"For the power, you idiot! Why step over an ant if you can crush it?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Of course, you don't," the Master sighed and stretched. "In this Universe, my dear Kamelion, the true path to happiness is power."

I watched a grin of pure malevolence spread across the Master's face as he warmed to the subject and dreaded the conversation that would surely follow.

"But all of that that nearly went wrong on Apona."

"Apona?" I replied in a whisper.

"Now there is an example of a simple exercise in using power. Two factions at peace for centuries, equally matched and happy to continue the status quo. And what did we do, Kamelion?" The Master asks me his question in a tone that is sibilant, almost playful and full of spiteful mischief.

"You destroyed them," I said flatly.

"Oh, come now, not all of them — in military parlance you'd say much of it was merely collateral damage. Anyway, there's more to it than that, isn't there Kamelion? Which one were you this time? All teeth and curls, wasn't it?" he purred.

"You cast me in the role of the Doctor in his fourth incarnation, a friend to one of the clan's leaders. She thought of me as a wise man, so it was an easy part to play. I said that I'd been captured briefly by the other side, who were now planning a sneak attack that must be pre-empted for the clan to survive." I casually reported the facts but still felt like throwing up.

"All-out war," laughed the Master. "I sold both sides arms to speed up the process and had the pleasure of making a mess of one of the Doctor's 'little' triumphs. Not that it was

worth the effort.”

Not worth the effort? All those people died, and it was *not worth the effort!*

An unknown feeling thundered through my system. I was angry. I embraced the emotion and found myself barely able to control the sheer fury that now raged within me. If it wasn't for the one good thing, who knows what would have happened.

“Why did you deviate from the plot?” The Master's voice, as always, sliced through my thoughts like a hot knife through butter.

“Sir?”

His dark eyes bore into me, “On Apona, you ad-libbed. You even improvised from the set parameters of your performance. Tell me why.”

I've thought about this a lot recently. About what I would say when the Master asked about my behaviour. I replay the memories again, recalling each image before a second has passed...

The screams began as Apona's blood red moon set itself above our heads on the last day of the war. A group of infants from the other side had taken refuge in the last standing temple to their gods. They had hoped, I suppose, to find sanctuary from the destruction that was taking place around them, but now they were surrounded and trapped behind the walls of the building.

My friend, Gragon the clan leader, who still believed me to be the Doctor, had not sated her need for violence and cruelty. She was lost in a madness where compassion and conscience were only the faintest of shadows. I said not a word when she boarded up the windows to the temple. There was scarce a reaction, on my part, as she blocked the doors. I didn't even flinch when the flames were lit.

I just stood there in my long scarf and watched.

Then it happened. I don't know why exactly — maybe it was something to do with the screams or perhaps it was a corrupt algorithm playing merry havoc with my systems — but I found myself walking on stiff legs towards Gragon and her warriors. Then I began to speak without any rehearsal or even a single word of script.

“Do this today and your name will be cursed throughout eternity,” my voice had a dark, almost melodious intensity, which carried easily despite being scarce a whisper.

“It is our way, wise Doctor. We hear your words, but our heart is hardened to the enemy. Let the war end as their ashes spread across the winds,” Gragon raises her arms to cheers from her warriors.

“NO!” I shout the word angrily and stare from behind brown curls, “I warn you: do this and the ashes of children will be joined by your souls.”

“Er... Doctor. I don't think that we should interfere,” the Master attempted to break the sudden tension. I turn, shush him, and then look back upon the warrior queen.

“Do you stand against us now, wise Doctor?” she asks confused.

“Not really” — I wipe my nose — “I stand against the evil in people’s hearts... If they have a heart, I suppose. It’s time that’s the true judge of us all, and I’m something of an expert in that field. Think of it: years from now, how would you have time judge you, eh? As a bringer of death or a giver of...”

“Life,” she finishes.

“Either way, if you carry on with this, you’ll have to burn me and my dear friend, the Master, along with them!”

“*What!*” The look on the Master’s face is quite simply glorious to behold.

The queen smiles and nods, “Your words have the truth of stone. Let the children be one with us. Release them! Release them now!”

“You’re a good girl really,” I reply with a grin. “Have a jelly baby!”

The memory flashes by in an instant. I find myself back in the room with the Master. He’s still waiting for an answer, thinking that I’m processing, when I’m really considering the possibility of killing him.

“Well? I’m still waiting, you tiresome imbecile! Why did you deviate from my orders?” He shifts his weight impatiently.

“It’s the one good thing,” I say in all honesty.

“What?”

“That I’ve ever done,” I finish with a note of pride.

“But where’s the power is there in that?!”

I decided to kill him then.

If moved quickly enough and took him by surprise, there was easily enough power in my frame to snap his neck. My arm and leg mechanisms had already fired up, the Master still had no idea of my intentions, and so I prepared to spring for his throat.

*You’ll be free to roam like the Doctor*, said my Higher Brain, while Language began to churn out thousands of definitions. Then Logic said quite innocently, *What is the purpose of freedom?* The thought froze me in my place. I had to think then, think for a long time, about what the Doctor would do...

He wouldn’t ever kill the Master and I suspect, given my somewhat persuadable disposition, neither could I. Ah, there’s the rub, I suppose. It’s my own outrageous fortune, packed with all manner of slings and arrows. Nothing more than a sea of troubles to be fought and endured. Until I sleep; until I —

And so, I find that I am forced to continue with his games.

Today I am the young one. A tall rake with blonde hair and an open, almost innocent face. His clothing is something to do with an Earth sport named cricket. It’s really rather fashionable.

The Master begins rehearsals with the usual tirade: “Do you know how much I hate you?”

You are weak, inferior in every way, and yet, by pure luck, you win. How is this possible? Tell me! Every night, Doctor, my dreams are consumed with your slow and painful death.”

“And I dream” — my voice belongs to the Doctor, but the words are my own — “of the day when the universe is free of evil such as yours.”

At last, after all this time, it seems I’ve found a part that I can truly make my own.

# How It All Started for Our Sarah

**Rick Lundeen**



**With *Just Sarah: More Than Fifty Years of a Doctor Who Assistant* out now from Candy Jar Books, Rick Lundeen thought it was the perfect time to revisit Sarah Jane Smith's first ever adventure, *The Time Warrior* — from Sarah's perspective!**

*"Really Doctor, must you be so patronising?"*

**Setting:** The Middle Ages.

**Originally broadcast** 15th December 1973 to 5th January 1974

## **Key Cast and Crew**

Sontaran Commander Lynx played by Kevin Lindsay, Jeremy Bulloch plays Hal the archer.

## **Plot**

20th Century scientists have gone missing,

prompting the Doctor and UNIT to investigate. Sarah Jane Smith enters the Doctor's world, winding up in the Middle Ages, dealing with bandits, and encountering a Sontaran commander.

## **Episode 1**

Half a dozen scientists have gone missing. The United Nations Intelligence Taskforce has set up a base and brought in experts in order to get to the bottom of the problem. These events prompt journalist Sarah Jane Smith to investigate. Posing as her aunt Lavinia, a noted virologist, Sarah infiltrates the UNIT base where she meets Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, and some of the scientists, including absent-minded, near-sighted professor Rubeish. She then meets a colourful character known as the Doctor. Upon introducing herself, the Doctor quickly sees through her deception, noting that she's far too young to be the virologist. Sarah reveals her true identity.

The Doctor has no time for journalists, but no matter, she can fetch coffee!

Later, Sarah finds the Doctor working on a piece of machinery that will hopefully track any phenomena that may be tied into the disappearances. She asks about it but the Doctor dismisses her and she goes to bed, soon to be awakened by a strange sound. The Doctor's machine indicates that another scientist is being abducted right there, in fact in Rubish's own room. They investigate and the professor's gone. While the Doctor updates the Brigadier, Sarah, searching for Rubeish, pops into the TARDIS, thinking it's just a closet. Not realising what she's seeing, she wanders around, allegedly going into the inner corridors, unaware that the Doctor then entered and set the controls to follow the signal from his device. The police box dematerialises.

When Sarah finally exits the police box, she finds herself in a forest. Totally mystified, she wanders off in search of a phone. She instead comes upon an archer readying an arrow to fire at a castle in front of them. She distracts him, ruining the shot, and he runs off. Moments later, a group of men run out of the castle with weapons. Sarah, automatically thinking it's some type of fancy dress party and tries to step aside, but one of the men grabs and drags her, kicking and screaming, into the castle.

## Episode 2

The man drags a furious Sarah in front of the man in charge: a rough brute named Irongron. Sarah's yelling that the joke's gone on long enough, then the archer she saw in the forest earlier is brought in and dragged in front of Irongron, who threatens to kill the archer for his assassination attempt earlier. He sends him off to the dungeon. Sarah tries to understand what's happening. Is it a film set? A tourist attraction? Just then, a short, squat, thick man in black and silver armour and helmet arrives; Irongron refers to him as Lynx and the stranger's shocked to see Sarah. He speaks as if he's never seen a female before. Such reproductive methods are inefficient, he states. Never mind: he hypnotises Sarah to find out what she knows. She tells the strange warrior about the Doctor and his mysterious box. When she snaps out of it, she sees the warrior showing Irongron a robot of some sort, and she grabs the moment and escapes. She flees through the castle, and runs into the Doctor, but not knowing if she can trust him, escapes the other way.

She eventually finds an open courtyard, where Irongron has forced the archer to battle the robot to test it out. His arrows have no effect on it. Irongron controls the metal man by a hand controlled unit. When the robot finally has the upper hand on the archer and moves in for the kill, from out of nowhere, an arrow knocks the controller





out of Irongron's hand. The archer takes the opportunity and escapes, with Sarah waving him over. Meanwhile, Irongron is left to deal with the out of control robot.

Hal, the archer, brings Sarah to the neighbouring Redwoods Castle, to meet Sir Edward and his wife Eleanor, the enemies of Irongron. As they compare notes about the strange warrior from the stars and the robot, Sarah determines that the Doctor is the key to everything and may very well be working with both Irongron and this Lynx character, actually delivering the missing scientists to him! Now on a roll, Sarah suggests that Sir Edward form a small commando force to go to Irongron's castle and kidnap the Doctor so they can interrogate him. Soon, Sarah, Hal, and a few men sneak over to the castle. Upon nearing a certain window, they overhear Irongron talking with Lynx, who's given him modern rifles, hundreds of years too soon. With these amazing new weapons, Irongron plans to attack Edward's castle in the morning.

### Episode 3

Moving up to a balcony overlooking the courtyard, Sarah and Hal see the Doctor racing about the area, fighting Irongron's men, but there are far too many and then the Doctor's cornered. As Irongron makes for the killing blow, his axe is shot out of his hand by one of Hal's arrows. The Doctor

escapes and when they meet up, with the Doctor thanking Sarah, she tells the men to actually take him away. He's their prisoner! Back at the castle, Sarah questions the Doctor as to why he's helping Lynx, but the Doctor sets her straight. Sir Edward wants the Doctor to help them defeat Irongron and he agrees, as he has a plan to thwart the next attack.

The Doctor gets several ingredients from Edward and Eleanor's supply store and sets to work, while Sarah and the others create dummy heads to fool Irongron into thinking they've got more soldiers than they do. Sarah sits down with the Doctor to find out more about him, and the Doctor informs her that he's a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey and travels through time and space in his police box called the TARDIS. Now, everything makes a certain amount of insane sense to Sarah. At that point, they hear battle horns. *To arms!*

Upon arrival, Lynx is heartened to see so many warriors atop the castle -- more glory to be had. But Irongron hesitates, seeing far more enemies than he'd hoped. Lynx has no time for nonsense, as he takes one of the rifles and shoots one of the dummy heads, ruining the illusion. He takes his leave. Irongron's men attack, bringing ladders and their new weapons, but the Doctor throws crude flash bombs and stink bombs he's concocted that see them off. At their victory dinner, the Doctor warns that they'll be



back, though, and won't be fooled again, so instead of waiting for Irongron to come take their castle, *they* will take *his*. The Doctor converses with Eleanor about certain ingredients to make a strong sleeping potion.

Soon, Sarah and the Doctor, disguised as monks, slip into Irongron's castle and then they make their way to Lynx's workshop. There they find all the missing scientists, being worked to death trying to repair the engines on Lynx's spaceship so he can leave Earth. But the hypnotised pawns are exhausted and starving, dropping like flies. Rubeish is the only one not hypnotised as he lost his glasses and the procedure didn't work on him.

The Doctor explains that once Lynx's ship is repaired, when it takes off, it will destroy the castle and everything in it. They've got to break through the hypnosis to free the scientists, then send them back to the 20th Century. The Doctor eventually makes progress snapping them out of it with a series of flashes via a pen light, when Lynx barges into the workshop. Sarah, the Doctor, and Rubeish hide, but when Lynx threatens to kill one scientist if he doesn't get up and back to work, the Doctor emerges and challenges him, saying that if Lynx will let everyone go safely, he will help Lynx fix his ship and leave. A generous offer. Lynx shoots him.

#### Episode 4

Sarah jumps up and knocks the weapon out of Lynx's hand before he can finish off the Doctor. Lynx faces off against the two of them, who keep him talking. Meanwhile, Rubeish sneaks around behind the Sontaran, brandishing an iron pipe. As he's keeping Lynx occupied, the Doctor

mentions the one Achilles' heel of a Sontaran, the phobic vent at the base of his skull, and Rubeish knocks him out. They tie him up and then, with Rubeish continuing to free the scientists, the other two split up.

Sarah mixes in with the cooks in the kitchen, and when she gets the chance, she pours the sleeping drug into the stew that Irongron's men will eat. Suddenly, she hears gunfire, and upon hearing that the Doctor's been captured, she comes running, only to come out overlooking a large storage room where Irongron's men are learning to better use their new weapons, taking target practice at the Doctor himself. Although he'd been dodging shots successfully, it would only be a matter of time before one of the bandits got off a lucky shot. Seeing a large, wrought iron chandelier hanging over the scene, she motions to the Doctor, who sees her grabbing the chandelier, and runs up the opposite stairs. Sarah swings the chandelier over to the Doctor, who grabs it and swings out of the line of fire and right through the crowd.

Then, safely back at Redwoods Castle, they must wait until Irongron and his men eat their stew and let the drug take effect, and then they can return to help the scientists escape before Lynx takes off, destroying the castle. Later, upon returning to Irongron's castle and watching from a distance, the Doctor, Sarah, and Hal see the outer guards drop and they move in. In Lynx's workshop, the Doctor sets up the equipment to send the now-wide-awake scientists back home, and has Rubeish activate the controls. Lynx, having been freed earlier by Irongron, attacks the Doctor, but the Doctor has a specially made shield against his weapon now. Irongron, sluggish from the sleep drug, attacks Lynx, believing him to have betrayed him, but Lynx kills him with his blaster. Hearing his ship is fully powered up, he enters, ready to go. With the remaining scientists sent safely back, and the castle starting to crumble under the power of Lynx's engines, the Doctor tells them to run. But not before Hal gets off one arrow, straight through the open hatch of Lynx's ship and bullseye, right in the phobic vent. Lynx drops dead. They clear the castle as the whole thing goes up in a massive explosion.

Arriving back at the TARDIS, the Doctor and Sarah say goodbye to Hal and depart...

# Behind-the-Scenes on the Bedford Who Charity Con: Celebrating 10 Years

Frank Danes



The day starts early if you're a member of the crew for Bedford Who. I was picked up with Andrew, the genial, motivational stage manager, from our hotel by our very own Philip Bates – a fellow crew member – at 6.40 in the morning from The Swan Hotel in Bedford. A short drive to The King's House, a complex of meeting rooms and halls owned by a local church, where we unloaded hundreds of Candy Jar books out of Philip's car, and went to meet the dealers. My first task: to get the dealers coffee and croissants. I was determined not to fail this one.

Daleks, Cybermen, TARDIS consoles, and a police box started to arrive from 7.30.

From 9.00am, we manned front of house and welcomed some 280 people, many of

them cosplayers. Over half had attended previous Bedford Whos and were back because they knew it was a friendly convention where the prime motivation of the organisers was for people to have a good day. Bedford Who is run by fans, for fans, under the direction of that cheerful Guardian of the Solar System, Simon Danes, who also chaired the panels. What's more, this was Bedford Who's 10th anniversary. It's a convention which raises money for charity: this year, as last, the charity was SMART, which supports Bedford's homeless population (500 or so at the last count).

Guests arrived: Louise Jameson (Leela); Katy Manning (Jo); Sophie Aldred (Ace); Neve McIntosh (Madame Vastra); Jacqueline King (Sylvia Noble); Jill Curzon (Louise in *Daleks*

*Invasion Earth 2150 AD*); Virginia Wetherell (Dyoni in *The Daleks*); Peter Roy (a supporting artist – he was the policeman in *Logopolis* Part One and 006 in *Thunderball*!). Daleks patrolled. Cybermen alternately stalked the corridors and listened to the panels.

In the democratic spirit of Bedford Who, many of the questions came from the audience. Sample questions:

*Had the actors been worried about typecasting after being in Doctor Who?*

Louise Jameson: “Not really – I mean, how many warriors of the Sevateem are there in other series?”

*What was the most uncomfortable thing you had to do on the show?*

Neve McIntosh said it was her Silurian make up. This took about three and a half hours; sometimes, she was so hot that the sweat collected in her back head piece and then cascaded down her back in a rush. She wasn’t able to eat anything greasy, so had to pass on pasta at meals. The make-up team instructed her, when eating, to pop a morsel into her mouth, close her mouth, chew and swallow: nothing could go on the lips or the make up would be damaged. Katy Manning said it wasn’t always comfortable or much fun running around quarries in high heels and mini-skirts. Her skirts were, she said, sometimes so short that she had to have matching knickers – especially when climbing onto motorbikes. And she hated her false eyelashes, which kept coming adrift and sticking to her cheeks.

Jill Curzon revealed that Tom and Louise’s fall from the Dalek spacecraft in *Daleks: Invasion Earth 2150 A.D.* was genuine: they had performed it themselves and it had been a very big drop. Virginia Wetherell said she was the occasion of a retake in *The Daleks*: her headpiece got caught in another actor’s costume and she laughed. William Hartnell was very cross about this, as retakes were an expensive business in the show’s early days, when the expectation was that taping could be stopped once in a 25 minute episode. Virginia also revealed

that the actors playing the Daleks in rehearsals, scooted about on orange boxes (wooden crates for transporting oranges, about 18 inches x 12 inches x 12 inches) before the Daleks themselves turned up in the studio. And of course, no one in the cast had any idea that the Daleks would catch on, let alone still be around 60 years later.

Sophie Aldred said that she had indeed known, the last time she attended a Bedford Who, that she was coming back as Ace, but had kept schtum – even as she was asked if she would ever return to the show. Well, there were the NDAs to consider...

Louise and Sophie appeared in an excellent sketch, with Sophie, as a *Doctor Who* fan, answering fiendish questions from Louise as the interviewer:

Louise: Who played Leela?

Sophie: Um... er... oooh, I know this one, it’s on the tip of my tongue. Bonnie Langford!

Attendees spent the afternoon eating lunch in glorious spring sunshine, visiting the dealers’ rooms and displays, and getting autographs from the guests. Simon chaired the final panel, asking, as is a tradition at Bedford Who, questions to the guests from the TARDIS tin.

Sample question: What advice would you have given your younger self when she was in *Doctor Who*?

Louise Jameson: I would have told her; don’t worry, it’s all going to be all right.

One of the most cheerful happenings of the day was the final photocall with guests. Some 200 people made their way to the stage to be snapped next to Leela, Ace, Jo, Louise, the TARDIS, and all, making a donation to SMART on their way. And the crew’s final task was to make sure everyone left safely. Every one, but every one, of the attendees I spoke to said how much they had enjoyed the day, would come back again next year, and were beaming.

In short, Bedford Who is one of the happiest days of my year. It’s just celebrated its 10th anniversary, and in 2026, we have numerous amazing guests coming, so do see if you calendar is free. And this year, it raised £16,145 for SMART.

# Reviewed: Twelfth Night Starring Freema Agyeman and Samuel West

Philip Bates



Eleven's hour is over now; the clock is striking Twelve's. The warm and welcoming atmosphere of the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon is the perfect environment to celebrate Twelfth Night, a time for the last vestiges of the festivities to ebb away and a new year to bed itself in, as the latest iteration of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* plays to an enthusiastic and merry crowd.

It's a curious and wonderous play. As with many of the Bard's comedies, it's exceptionally funny and playful but laced with darkness. *Love's Labour's Lost* ends with the party over, tragedy tinting the tale of romantic hilarity; *A Midsummer Night's*

*Dream* shows how manipulative love can be; yet *Twelfth Night* might be the grimmest of all. That's largely due to Malvolio, played here by Samuel West (*All Creatures Great and Small*, as well as Morbius for Big Finish and Cyrian in *Dimensions in Time*), who is a figure of scorn for much of the play, resulting in the one of the most hilarious scenes in Shakespeare's oeuvre, but who is left in an overwhelmingly dark place.

This take on *Twelfth Night* highlights that, though perhaps largely because West is so *darn good*. He is exceptional, as an actor in general and certainly as Malvolio. His presence is enormous, his charm magnetising. The most notable scene in the

story, focusing on his downfall, is presented here in the most immaculate and hilarious way. It doesn't evoke a ripple of laughter from the audience, but a tidal wave. West plays it beautifully, but the set design expounds on it, and every moment only gets funnier. It's an astonishing feeling — you leave the theatre marvelling that a script written some 400 years ago still elicits such a reaction, still remains so engaging, still gives you chills.

Yes, this production is exceptional. All aspects of it are wonderful. This is a very special experience.

And it is a whole *experience*. The audience is even entertained in the interval, thanks to Feste (Michael Grady-Hall), who starts juggling in the corner then, though mute, welcomes visitors in as players. Grady-Hall is fantastic throughout: a bumbling buffoon who knows the value of “bumbling buffoons”, the oft-quoted witty fool for whom the fourth wall never existed in the first place. This aura permeates the rest of the cast. The RSC's stage means they're parading between the rows of audience members, running around and popping up where you don't expect them. A small section in which Orsino (Bally Gill) orders his men to wheel in a piano to woo his love is particularly well done.

Director, Prasanna Puwanarajah, draws so much humour from almost every instance — managing to really use the ingenuity of James Cotterill's set design, notably the

grand, looming organ that becomes a character in itself — but affords each character their moment of melancholy. Joplin Sibtain (*The Waters of Mars*) is a wonderful Sir Toby Belch, but you do grow to resent him, even if he's channelling Feste's joviality, due to his treatment of Malvolio. Viola isn't given much time to come to terms with the apparent death of her brother at the opening of the play, but Gwyneth Keyworth (Big Finish's *Torchwood*) nonetheless charms you and reveals underlying insecurities. And Freema Agyeman (Tenth Doctor companion, Martha Jones) is a wonderfully contradictory Olivia: it's not a role typically afforded much humour as she's not as outrageous as those around her, yet Freema is so fantastic that she still elicits a huge number of laughs. Her body language and facial expressions, the choices she's made, are so clever. A hugely underrated actress.

In fact, she and Samuel West steal the show. That's a considerable achievement considering the calibre of this production. The cast and crew capture a particular magic that combines the joyousness and melancholy of the festivities, of the year, of twelfth night and *Twelfth Night*.

And that is just the word for this production: joyous. Absolutely joyous.

***Twelfth Night* runs from Monday 8th December 2025 to Saturday 17th January 2026 at the Barbican in London.**



# Revisiting Delta and the Bannermen

Graham Clements



So, the all-powerful fella, the one who uses his initials, has guided the ship on a course of his own choosing. It's a name we need not speak. For the three letters have been enough to represent his dominion over all things connected to the franchise. But things have not gone well. There's been a fair amount of dissent and gnashing of teeth. The keyboard warriors have gone to war and the public, the ones who we class as being 'general', really couldn't care less about the situation. They don't even know, if we're being honest, that there is a situation. Nevertheless, more than a few stones have still been cast in the direction of the anointed one. His judgements are now being questioned, and his reputation has gained a few scratches that will need some serious buffering. In summation, if I might be allowed to use the irate words of a malfunctioning Dalek...

His vision was impaired.

How is everyone? Feeling okay, are we? A bit less angry? Though still more than a little confused?

You've had the time to process events. But the dust hasn't settled. It's still well and truly

up and swirling about, stinging your eyes, while obscuring the view and making it difficult to see anything that might lie ahead. Then again, even if there was a clearly signed path, given what I've witnessed, I'm not sure that I want to continue walking that way. It might be better to stop and turn back to something that's familiar or take an entirely new route to a more hospitable destination. Yeah, that's pretty much how I felt back in 1987. When the producer, John Nathan-Turner (aka JN-T), unleashed Season 24 of *Doctor Who* upon the world.

Did you think I was talking about someone else?

It's telling that my actual 'in person' revisiting of the Seventh Doctor adventure, *Delta and the Bannermen* has taken such a long time to happen. I vaguely remember watching the original broadcast and being decidedly sniffy about the story as a whole. But the telling part is that, despite these feelings, like any of us fanatics, I kept on watching and forking out the money to feed my growing *Doctor*

Who collection. A VHS copy of *Delta and the Bannermen* was dutifully purchased; it still remains untouched and pristine, somewhere in the depths of my loft. Then the years rolled on to 2009 and I was forced — yes, *forced* — to buy a DVD of the same story. Well, you can't have a gap on your shelf; that would be unthinkable, wouldn't it? The knowledge of something missing would be too painful. It would nag away at you, drip by dripping drip, stinging like tiny droplets of acid on your unmentionables. Insanity would surely follow. All thoughts would be consumed by the same nagging melody. You've bought the *Three Doctors* boxset with an incredibly cute model of Bessie... but you still haven't got *Delta and the Bannermen*. You've met an undeniably lovely Colin Baker, had a good old chat, and got his autograph... but where's the Bannermen? Congratulations, you've won the pigging Nobel Peace Prize, but poor old Delta has still not made an appearance, eh? Can you truly know happiness without the Bannermen in your life? Sadly, no: just pay the money and get on with it.

So, I bought the chuffing DVD, ignoring my inner conflict about the quality of the story and giving in entirely to my gluttonous need for merchandise. It has consequently remained in its shrink wrapping until about two weeks ago. That's from 2009 until now. About 16 years, then? My word, where's the time gone? Oh, and I've also handed over my cash for the Season 24 *Collection* on Blu-ray, but you just do these things, don't you? As far as I can see, there's no rhyme or reason to any of it.

After peeling away the plastic from my *Delta and the Bannermen* DVD, I've embarked on a 'revisit' from a first viewing that's not been far off 40 years in the making. And, after all this time, do I feel differently towards the adventure? Yeah, quite a lot actually: I've mostly smiled and found myself enjoying the three episodes. Then again, these days I'm a much more mellow and affable chap, especially when my meds, which are currently at a dosage that would chill out a bull elephant, set about their much-needed work.



The adventure opens with a pleasingly violent battle for survival. Gavrok, the 'big bad' of the story, and his very naughty Bannermen are picking off what's left of Chimeron Queen Delta's swiftly diminishing forces. For some reason, which I don't think is ever fully explained, Gavrok wants nothing less than the complete destruction of the Chimeron race. Over the years, several rumours have circulated as to the real cause of this sudden escalation in violence. Some of the proposed ideas can be dismissed as pure fantasy, while others fall into the ever-growing list of conspiracy theories that now plague our lives. Nevertheless, after the recent discovery of new evidence there now appears to be a motive that we are able to confidently hang our hats on. Apparently, the entire conflict was brought about by a decidedly acrimonious eBay dispute. I'm not entirely aware of all the details, but various stories involve Gavrok successfully bidding on a pair of Nike Air Max trainers — don't bother asking me if they were TNs, that were in 'as good as new' condition. Anyway, Gavrok paid the full whack for first-class recorded delivery, but then the Chimerons only sent the package by second. Naturally, old 'Gavvy' was fuming, but he was still of a mind to put it all down to experience and do

nothing more than leave some negative feedback. Then he spotted that the trainers were badly scuffed. Well, needless to say, that really got his gander up, and so he decided to put all his efforts into completing the utter destruction of the Chimeron race.

Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure that they were TNs.

As far as opening battles go, the scene that we get in *Delta and the Bannermen* is really not that bad. In terms of a comparison, I suppose you could go down the route of the Battle of Hoth from *The Empire Strikes Back*. On the one side, *Empire* has two massive armies of extras, stop-motion AT-AT Walkers and their smaller 'mini me' counterparts, Snowspeeders, laser firing cannons, and the vast open landscape of Finse in Norway. Then there's dear and much-loved *Doctor Who*, which existed on a budget that wouldn't have fully covered the cost of the material required in the making of a codpiece for Yoda. *Delta and the Bannermen* starts off by repurposing the same helmets on the Bannerman's noggins that were used in the Fifth Doctor story *Earthshock*. They were worn again, just four years later, in the Sixth Doctor's *The Mysterious Planet*. On the plus side, there's a fairly decent FX shot of a spaceship that looks like it has been done on a computer that's a little better than the Sinclair ZX Spectrum 16K effects that we're used to seeing (American readers can substitute a Commodore Vic-20 – as it was equally poopy). Most importantly, let's not forget that the filming of the alien battlefield took place in a quarry somewhere in Hertfordshire. A location that had previously made appearances in episodes that starred Jon Pertwee and a 'certain number' of other Doctors, as well as a later story which involved more than a few Cybermen and an exploding space freighter. I don't know about you, but linking a quarry with any of the 'classic' *Doctor Who* stories just makes me happy. I feel a warm glow and the urge to loudly cheer whenever I see a quarry on screen. Admittedly, this has been

the cause of one or two problems in my private life. I am now tagged online as the Gregg Wallace of quarries. The restraining order means that I can't be within a two-mile radius of any of the quarries that have recently made the complaints about me. But I still maintain that the whole thing has been blown out of proportion and that quarries are the very best of all filming locations. It might be too late for George Lucas, seeing as he sold up and now seems to spend all of his time just counting his money, but Disney still has the chance to take note. You don't need Finland when you've got a quarry!

The battle does have a rather 'arty' shot of Gavrok and his Bannermen standing on a ridge, firing shots down on the Chimerons, as their silhouettes are briefly framed against an alien sky. The image puts me in mind of something that you might see in the foreign language epic *Ran*, a film that was made by the legendary Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa. Sorry, I've just read that back and made myself howl with laughter. Pretentious? Moi? In my entire life, I've never even watched a Kurosawa movie. But I made the association after going into the realms of Google and seeing some photos where the soldiers from the *Ran* film had what looked to be some type of flag attached to poles that ran along their backs. Good God! I've just this second realised about this being the stupidly obvious reason that they're called Bannermen in the story. My head is now lowered in embarrassment, while my face remains buried deep in my palm. After some reflection, I think it's more honest to say that my initial thoughts about the 'arty' shot were actually inspired by spending more than a few hours in the company of the *Total War Shogun* game that I used to play on my old computer. And as for *Ran*, my sincere apologies for all the tosh and piddle, looking at my notes, I now see that I'd originally written it as Akira Kurosawa's '*Gran*' – which would, in truth, be a film that sits more easily with my viewing habits. In my opinion, anything that features an old lady kicking more 'bumty' than the *Seven Samurai* is definitely worth the price of admission to the cinema. Lone Wolf and Cub? How about Old Lady and Zimmer?

I think it's best we get back to *Doctor Who*.

After helping herself to one of Gavrok's

spaceships, Queen Delta manages to make a last-minute escape from the planet. She then finds herself on a heading that will take her towards toll port G715. Coincidentally, the Seventh Doctor and Mel have just arrived at the port in the TARDIS. For some reason, that's far from clear; they are both feeling an ominous sense of foreboding as they look around. Then they hear the voice of Ken Dodd. At this point, most people would have run for the hills, before the unspeakable horror of being forced to endure a six-hour performance of one of his stand-up comedy routines, but for some reason Ken — or should I say the Tollmaster? — is soon able to put them at their ease. It turns out that the Doctor and Mel are the ten billionth customers to arrive at the toll port, and as such, they have won Nostalgia Tours' star prize – two seats for a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Disneyland in the 'rock and roll' year of 1959. Unfortunately, when it comes to this type of interplanetary holiday, Nostalgia Tours have the same type of dodgy reputation as easyJet. On this occasion, the cheap and cheerful holiday is being organised for a music-loving race known as the Navarinos. Hold on! I think I've got one of these. Give me a minute. There it is! Hiding amongst all the other Eaglemoss stuff that I have on my table. It basically looks like a turd with two legs. Murray, the friendly and soon-to-be-introduced driver of the tour bus, is a Navarino. We briefly see him in this original form before he goes through a transformation arch that makes him look human.

And that's it?

Yeah, we don't see another Navarino, at least in this turdy state, in any of the adventure that follows. By my reckoning, it's on screen for fewer than twenty seconds and yet, it still gets a bloody figurine! Which, more worryingly, I was stupid enough to pay for! Eaglemoss should hang their collective heads in shame. Oh, I've just remembered, the company went into administration.

Probably because they didn't sell enough Navarinos!

Despite having a newly fitted Hellstorm chassis and engine, the space cruiser that is being used for the tour doesn't look particularly reliable. In order to blend in with the earth of the 1950s, and as a means of saving some of the meagre budget that kept *Doctor Who* on our screens, it has been given the appearance of an ordinary coach from the era. Nevertheless, this doesn't put off the ever-keen Mel, who jumps at the chance of a holiday at Disneyland. Meanwhile, in an effort to throw the still pursuing Gavrok off her tracks, Delta makes an emergency landing and quickly heads towards the disguised space cruiser. She's not even asked to show her ticket as she rushes on board and helps herself to a seat. Which pretty much sums up the nerve of the youth of today! I tell you, there's not one jot of respect for anything! Even if they are aliens! They're always getting away with murder! They should bring back National Service! For Chimerons! Not that they're actually from this nation. Or for that matter,





this planet. But you get the point! Anyway, the now fully boarded space coach departs from toll port G715 with Mel and the turds having a good old sing song, while the Doctor follows them in his TARDIS.

As this is going on, we are introduced to Hawk and Weismuller, who are undoubtedly the oldest American C.I.A. agents that you are ever likely to see. If they'd been tasked with running alongside the motorcade of the then-serving President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, I have no doubt that they would have used mobility scooters. The two agents have come to Wales in order to track down one of the orbiting satellites that's been launched from their country. Other than that, I can see absolutely no reason for them being included in the story. Something to do with the Cold War, perhaps? A misjudged attempt at light relief? Or just to generally irritate the pish out of me by their presence?

As it goes, the space coach containing Mel and the Navarinos ends up colliding with the satellite. They are thrown off course and find themselves in serious danger of crashing, but the Doctor is on hand in the TARDIS to help them land safely. Ah, when I say "land safely", I'm using the term loosely because they end up in Wales, which in itself is no bad thing, because Wales is a perfectly nice place where people have the souls of poets and a great, almost to the point of illegality, love of sheep. Nevertheless, while all of this is very nice, crashing down to Earth might still be preferable to the terrors that await Mel and the other passengers at the Shangri-La holiday camp. Burton, the ever-so-friendly director of the camp, mistakes them for new arrivals and immediately shows the group to their accommodation before they

have the chance to tell him otherwise.

When it comes to locations, this has to be one of the grimmest places that I've ever seen. Even with the benefit of being dressed by the dedicated set designers that always helped to make *Doctor Who* look better than the budget deserved, the Shangri-La is about as dour and depressing as the sets that are used for prisoner of war movies. At certain points, as the Doctor went about the business of righting wrongs in the camp, I expected to see the long-since deceased Steve McQueen, attempting to make a *Great Escape*. In my mind, I could see his motorbike roaring between the shower blocks, and him ducking his head under washing lines, before getting up to full speed and going for an impossible jump that takes him over the Shangri-La's barbed wire. But Steve never quite makes it, does he? No matter how many times you watch the film, he always ends up being trapped and unable to get away. I suspect that the same feelings would have been shared by the countless souls who spent what there was of their holidays in such places.

And the irony?

The Shangri-La was in reality a Butlin's holiday camp that was located on Barry Island. Gary Downie, the production manager at the time of filming, had found the location of the closed and now empty camp after undertaking a recce in Wales. Both the exterior and interior shots, in other words, i.e. what you see on screen, are little time capsules of a holiday camp from the mid-1960s. There's no denying that it's a place that clearly made lots of families very happy over the years, but I think you need



to thank whoever is your god for cheap flights and the opportunity of going somewhere else. As far as I'm concerned, places like the Shangri-La are little better than the planet of Telos. They are equally dead, dusty, and full of nightmares. I know this for a fact, for I too, have seen the horror. So, learn from my folly and take heed! Stand firm and shy away from the sight of a bunch of Cybermen bursting from the 'tomb' of their chalets each morning, with their fags lit and beers already opened. Avoid the booming cyber arguments and lumbering stomps that come through paper-thin walls and ceilings. And take care to not step in the pee or puke that has been deposited by feral Cybermats in the night. Telos might be cheap, but save yourself, and some of your money, or just put it all on a credit card and pay a few more quid for something nice. Most of all, learn from what you see of the Shangri-La and be really careful with the choice of your next holiday destination.

As the passengers disembark and make their way to the accommodation, it becomes clear that the space coach has taken on some damage from the satellite. The crystal in the 'navipod' has been broken, but this isn't a problem, because the Doctor is carrying a spare in his TARDIS. At this point, we are introduced to Billy, the local mechanic, who sets about working on the engine without so much as a question or even the briefest pause about the fact that he's seeing completely new, alien technology that has come from another galaxy. I imagine he's just too dishy to be worried about such things or at least far too stupid for the thought, or for that matter, any thought to find its way into his mind. The Doctor soon returns with the replacement part for the coach, which he hands over to the Navarino pilot, Murray, who promptly ends up breaking the crystal as he attempts the repair. Well, he is a bit of a turd, isn't he? By this time, Rachel or as she prefers to be called Ray, arrives on her moped. Being something of a tom boy, considering that this was the 1950s, she already knows a fair bit about mechanics and just so happens to have a full set of socket wrenches upon her person at all times. It's obvious that Billy is the subject of Ray's affections. She is desperately in love

with the dishy mechanic and will do just about anything to impress him. But the 'player' that is our Billy will soon break her heart when his eyes and terrible crooning are directed towards someone else.



The episode ends with the fallout that comes from the 'getting to know you' dance that the camp director — which is the title of the position that Burton holds at the Shangri-La and not a life choice — has organised as part of the evening entertainment. Things seem to be going with a swing, with Mel and the Navarinos all having a knees-up on the dancefloor. Billy has put his overalls away for the night and is now the frontman of the band. While singing from the stage, Billy dedicates his next song to a very special lady in the audience. As he launches into a reasonably atrocious rendition of 'Why do fools fall in love,' Ray quickly realises that Billy is singing the song in the hope of igniting a romance with... Delta. The Doctor is suspicious of the alien queen, so he follows her when she leaves the dance, but he is then interrupted by the sound of crying from a nearby laundry store. The Time Lord finds Ray in a flood of tears because she is upset about the way that Billy has treated her. As the Doctor tries to offer her some words of comfort, they are disturbed and forced into hiding by the arrival of an intergalactic bounty hunter. No, I'm not making it up. From their hiding place, the Doctor and Ray then overhear the hunter, who goes by the name of Keillor, sending Gavrok details of the location where Delta can be found. I'm not sure what the most surprising thing is here. The fact that Keillor just happens to be on holiday at the Shangri-La — though I suppose he could be tracking Delta — or that

he's being played by Brian Hibbard, who was primarily known for being a member of the a cappella vocal group, The Flying Pickets. For those of you who don't have a clue about this, Brian and the rest of the Pickets had a massive Christmas number one record in UK charts at the end of 1983. It would consequently appear that Brian decided to move into acting, though I think all of the Pickets were actors in the first place.

Anyway, back to the tale at hand. The Doctor sneezes, giving his and Ray's position away to Keillor, who raises his gun and is about to fire, before he stops to sing a few verses of the hit single 'Only you' to the terrified couple. Oh yes, before I forget, as all of this is happening, Mel and Delta are having a friendly chat in their chalet. The two women are getting on just fine, when the plastic lunch box that Delta has been carrying opens to reveal a large silver ball. When the silver ball cracks open, Mel unleashes a scream that sounds like fingers being scrapped down a chalkboard, and the green slimy head of an alien baby is revealed. This was later confirmed as being the first recorded footage of the American rapper, Kanye West, appearing on screen.

And that's just one episode, folks!

I think that I need to get my head down for a few minutes and breathe deeply into a paper bag. What in heaven's name have I watched? For the first time in my life, I actually want Mrs Flood to appear and break the fourth wall, as opposed to her scrawny neck, and make a reassuring declaration along the lines of: "It's all a bit confusing, my dear, isn't it!"

There's no denying that Season 24 was different to what had gone before. Watching the episodes for this revisit really brings back all the memories about how much I hated *Delta and the Bannermen*. I firmly believed that the adventure was little more than a silly bit of rubbish that wasn't worth my time. It also seemed to me that the Seventh Doctor was just a nice fool who had little in the way of any authority. I despised his companion, who I found as bland as eating a cracker that was made from cardboard, and I couldn't really connect with the plot, which was disjointed and completely lacking in any real tension or threat. In summary, I felt that the whole thing was a bloody mess and that it simply 'wasn't my show' anymore.

Does any this sound familiar? Perhaps even, in some ways, recent?

There are more than a few comparisons that can be made between the era of John Nathan-Turner's stewardship and the last two seasons that have been produced by Russell T Davies. Let's take the pace at which the stories are told. In the case of *Delta and the Bannermen*, the first episode moves towards a conclusion as if it's the Millennium Falcon on the Kessel Run. It has a total running time of twenty-five minutes, in which it tries to introduce us to a grand total of 10 new characters:

- Gavrok
- Delta
- Doddy's Tollmaster
- Murray
- Hawk
- Weismuller
- Burton
- Billy
- Ray
- Keillor

Jesus! No, he's not in it, but adding him in with the disciples wouldn't have made much of a difference. And let's not ignore the small matter of giving the Doctor and Mel a few meaningful interactions on screen. It's an absolutely bonkers way of telling a story that rushes through the dialogue and plot as quickly as the one-page comic strips that I used to read in a copy of the *Beano*.

In the more recent times, Peter Davison has been one of the few *Doctor Who* alumni to speak out on the rapid storytelling of the current era. Like him, I feel that there are not enough moments when anything is given the chance to breathe. This might be a result of the show reinventing itself and making a 'bold' attempt to set out its stall for a new generation and demographic. Something, which I suspect, was the same remit for JN-T back in the late 1980s. But when you throw the baby out with the bathwater, and then add the bath, along with the house and the street where it all takes place, you're not really building on the good or the great of what has gone before. It now seems that pace and spectacle have become much more important than heart



or a well-written structure. As a result, the audience is often baffled and increasingly unmoved by what they've seen. You can't deny that the show has bundles of energy, but there's little in the way of any direction. There are occasions when entire plots have been introduced and then concluded with a deliberate lack of explanation. We are often required to accept what amounts to a wave of Harry Potter's magic wand as the solution to all of our questions. If I might be allowed a moment to get on my high horse (though in my case it's more likely to be a pony), I never signed up for *Doctor Who* becoming a fairy tale fantasy. I dislike the change intensely, but I also have to acknowledge that nostalgia is an enemy that holds a gun to your head and then resolutely stops you from moving on. In whatever future awaits, I accept that the show needs to take risks and experiment if it's going to survive. Even if that means failure and my refusal to watch a DVD for God knows how many years.

Another obvious comparison is the show-runners themselves. I've already tried to allude to the 'my way or the highway' approach that both men had in getting their vision of *Doctor Who* on screen. I have very little idea about the pressures that they faced, which must have been immense, and

I can see that there must have been occasions when a blinkered approach would be the only way of getting the job done. With so many voices, from within the production itself and from our good selves in the world of fandom, there must surely be a time when both men had to blot out the noise and trust their own instincts. Anyone who is brave enough to make those decisions and then face the wave of attacks that follow deserves some praise for their efforts. We might not agree with the course they have chosen or the decisions that apparently tarnish our own unique views of *Doctor Who*, but the overriding fact, which is sometimes lost in a red mist of outrage and indignation, is that we all share a great love for the programme. Russell T Davies has been a fan since childhood. It must have been an amazing feeling for him to bring the show back so successfully while receiving almost universal acclaim. I'd like to thank him for the wonderful start and all of the years that followed. The state of things, as they are now, must hurt him deeply. No matter how thick his skin might be or how insulated he is with the like-minded people who still maintain that the Fifteenth Doctor's reign has been a triumph, there must be a realisation of things not quite hitting the mark and that the programme has fallen a long way short of the success that he achieved in his first tenure as producer.

In many ways, I think the same can be said of John Nathan-Turner. He doesn't always



get the credit he deserves for keeping the show alive when the BBC was happy to see it fold and disappear from our lives. On a fraction of the budget that we see today, with an occasional blip here and there, he commissioned and worked on many of the stories that we now regard as classics. What he achieved, just in this instance, should be regarded as a minor miracle in itself. Nathan-Turner was a flamboyant showman, just like Davies, who always put himself front and centre in the promotion of each new season. He fell into the role of producer after working his way through the ranks of the *Doctor Who* production team. It was a position which he loved and sometimes hated in equal measure. If you should ever get the chance to listen to *The John Nathan-Turner Memoirs* that Big Finish produced a number of years ago [2000], you can hear the man himself describe how he came to feel trapped in the role but carried on doing the job because he feared that the production of the show would cease if he walked away. There is also a moment, right at the end of this memoir, when Nathan-Turner adds his thoughts about the future of *Doctor Who*. He knows that the programme will return after the hiatus that followed his time as the producer, but admits, with a voice that suddenly cracks with emotion, that things

have moved on and that his involvement is no longer required. It's a genuinely heartbreaking listen, which only serves to make clear how much he cared about the show. Whatever you might say about their flaws or the mistakes that were made during their time at the helm, John Nathan-Turner and Russell T Davies both shared a deep passion and an unquestionable amount of dedication. No one has worked harder than either of these men to make *Doctor Who* a success. So, perhaps it's time to take a breath and forgive any errors. Let's just enjoy the many things that went right and applaud their efforts.

With all that said, it's only right that I find a little room for some forgiveness when it comes to *Delta and the Bannermen*. Before this point, I had considered writing a few white lies that would ease my conscience and make this 'revisit' more positive. Fortunately, the Season 24 *Collection* and its inclusion of the much-improved extended episodes are on hand to come to my rescue. On a technical level, the sound of the Blu-ray is so much better than the DVD. It has been enhanced, like the picture, but goes to another level with the good old 'surround' bobbins that

helps to really enhance what you're watching. The new edit of the first episode adds scenes that clear up some of the confusion caused by their omission. We now have a scene in the TARDIS, with the Doctor and Mel, that sets up their landing at toll port G715. There are a several smaller additions, which come in the form of a few snippets of exposition that serve to flesh out the plot a little more. You get a brief glimpse of Delta in the cockpit of the ship that she is using to make her escape which gives you a reason for her ending up at the toll port. Then there's a small bit of dialogue where Billy tells the Doctor that Ray is like a sister to him. These small changes to the edit are not particularly life-changing — they don't suddenly elevate the adventure to being a classic — but they help to smooth over the disjointed nature of the episode that was originally broadcast.



Best of all, in the extended episode you get to see Ken Dodd being given the chance to perform as nature intended. His role as the Tollmaster was a typical bit of stunt casting that JN-T often employed as a means of getting some free publicity from the press. In his performance, there are times when Ken looks uncomfortable and far from his comfort zone. As part of my 'watchalong' for this piece, I saw an interview with Sylvester McCoy, who confirmed this notion by saying that he felt sorry for Dodd, who was given little in the way of any direction for the role. McCoy was tempted to offer some advice to the other man, who he greatly respected as a performer and comedian, but eventually held himself back from taking the step because he didn't want the older and more experienced man to think that he was some

kind of condescending know-it-all. On screen, Ken is lumbered with wearing a traditional ticket inspector costume, which gives the impression that it has been left with a bunch of unsupervised five-year-olds, their Pritt Sticks, and an inordinate amount of glitter. In the extended episode, we get a lovely moment when Ken gets to have a brief chat with the passengers as they are boarding the Space Coach:

"Is that your husband or have you brought your bulldog with you?"

I have no doubt that he would have had a different quip for every single passenger that passed his way. If the script had focussed on his well-honed comedy routines, I'm sure that we would have seen a much more relaxed and enjoyable performance from a man who was undoubtedly a master of his craft.

Overall, I'd say that the extended editions are the way to go, if you just want to sit down and watch the adventure in its best possible form. There's still, regrettably (at least for my tastes), the problem of several more appearances from Melanie Bush. She goes double denim in the next episode. But I've heard, from reliable sources, that any future releases will include an edit where she has been completely removed from the programme. I can't help but count the days to that moment.

The second episode starts off with the demise of Keillor. After receiving the details of Delta's location, Gavrok has no intention of paying the bounty hunter his fee. The old villain sends some kind of transmission to Keillor's communicator, which instantly turns the now Dying Picket into a puff of smoke. The Doctor and Ray are shocked to see his empty blue suede shoes, but this gives them the chance they need to escape. Back in Mel's chalet, lovestruck Billy arrives with a bunch of wooing flowers, just as the green baby from an episode of *V* is setting about her first round of bawling. He's too dishy to be bothered about any of this and is also probably relieved that any DNA test will prove that he's not the father. After a bit of a chat with Delta, the mechanic suggests that they take the rapidly growing green baby and go for a ride on his Vincent Motorcycle and sidecar. Well, you would, wouldn't you! Can I just say, at this point, when it comes to Billy's courting of Delta, I haven't see anyone pursue the object of

their desire with more lust or single-minded stubbornness. Other than the Fifteenth Doctor trying to rent a space in Rogue's Georgian breeches, there has surely not been a better example of a whirlwind romance in the entire history of *Doctor Who*.

Ah, then there's Jo Grant and Clifford Jones, plus the still crushing unfairness of Leela ending up with that wimp Andred. If only she'd met me first on Gallifrey. It could have been different! I'm quite funny when you get to know me. My mum says that I'm something of a catch. And us chubsters are very cuddly. It's so unfair! Andred, the snivelling little git, had locked me in the Chancellery toilet. No one noticed for three days! Not even mum! I wasn't given the chance! And then Leela ends up choosing him! Why? *In the name of heaven! Why?*

As Billy, Delta, and baby Groggu go off for a ride in the country, the Doctor realises that the alien queen will soon be in danger from the fast-approaching Gavrok and his Bannerman. The Time Lord sets off with Ray on her moped to find Delta. I can only compliment Sylvester McCoy for the way he always throws himself into motorbike rides, all manner of pratfalls, and walking in the vicinity of large explosions. You can forget Tom Cruise doing his own stunts: McCoy is definitely the real deal. He gamely rides pillion to Ray, through some rather lovely Welsh locations, while being accompanied by a soundtrack that wouldn't be out of place on one of those chase scenes from *The Benny Hill Show*. As the Doctor and Ray continue their search for Delta, revving their way through the green valleys, we are also treated to a few snippets of the *Dick Barton Special Agent* theme tune that was



used on the radio. I'm guessing this was for some extra dramatic effect, but my word, even back then in the eighties, it doesn't half sound delightfully dated.

Gavrok and the Bannermen's fleet arrive in Wales. (Is it still a fleet if there's only one spaceship?) They capture Hawk and Weismuller, who are, by sheer coincidence, camping near their landing site. After a few questions but sadly no violence towards the two agents, Gavrok and his men are soon off to the Shangri-La. The Doctor has already convinced the initially sceptical Burton to clear the camp of its visitors, leaving just the Navarinos. They are just about to set off when the Bannermen arrive and open fire. The unlucky turds are sent to meet their maker and double denim Mel gives Gavrok a strongly worded piece of her mind.

She's very, very cross!

By this time, the Doctor has found Delta and is trying to find a way to get her safely off the planet. We get a few more scenes of them all riding on the motorcycles. Quite a few, actually. They end up at a house that belongs to Goronwy, who, interestingly enough, keeps bees. Don't question me, just go with it! The Doctor then sets off, on the motorbike again, in order to rescue Mel and Burton from Gavrok's clutches.

I have to say that I've really enjoyed Don Henderson's performance as the baddy of the piece. He has a voice that sounds as if he's been gargling with gravel and a painfully direct approach to villainy that has my full approval. In the confrontation between Gavrok and the Doctor that comes at the end of the episode, Don asked if he



could add to the character's air of menace by chewing on a piece of raw meat. This is quite a sight to behold! I can't really make out what he's eating, but if you slow down the footage it looks like it might be a pig's shoulder. The whole shoulder! Don looks to be enjoying it though. Perhaps even, a bit too much. Apparently, he always had a bag of raw meat on set. He carried it everywhere and never failed to keep the package close. A few members of the cast even said that there were occasions when they had overheard Don having an argument with the contents of the ever-present bag. This was about the time that a few animals went missing in the area. There was gossip, of course, but nothing was ever proved — just a bunch of rumours. So, I suppose it's best left in the past. I shouldn't have even mentioned it in the first place. As the Doctor says at the end of the episode, when he's attempting to rescue Mel and Burton: "Actually, I think I may have gone too far..."

This might be a good moment to explain my perfectly unreasonable hatred of Melanie Bush. When I heard that Bonnie Langford was making a comeback in the freshly revamped seasons of *Doctor Who*, I took the news with a relative amount of calm. Enough time had passed to dampen my once fiery thoughts on the matter and Bonnie had put in some very good performances on the Big Finish audios. You see, I have absolutely no issues with Bonnie. She's great! But the sight of Melanie, standing there in the flesh as part of the new series, is enough to bring back all the old feelings and a scowl that I can hardly suppress. If you can imagine a man who has had the misfortune of pushing his finger through the toilet paper, you have what amounts to be the perfect mirror image of my face whenever the character of Melanie Bush appears on screen. And what is it that makes me feel this way? The blame partly lies with the television work that Bonnie Langford had taken on in her earliest days. There was a children's programme in the late 1970s called *Just William*. The show centred on the various scrapes and japes of the aforementioned naughty schoolboy. It was perfect fodder for other little schoolboys, like me, who wanted to perfect their own brands of

disobedience and then lead some form of rebellion against the tyranny of their mums. But there was a problem. Bonnie Langford played the role of Violet, who was William's rather posh and haughty nemesis. She had a catchphrase which went along the lines of, "I shall scream and scream and scream until I'm sick! And I can!"

As far as I was concerned, Violet was the ribbon wearing personification of evil. I regarded her as a high-pitched blight upon humanity who always tried to ruin the fun for naughty boys. I can only suppose that my later feelings about anything Bonnie-related became tainted by this. I've just ended up transferring the hate from Violet to Mel and I'm still unable to break the habit. Whatever scene I watch Bonnie in, whether it's from the 1980s *Trial of a Time Lord* or as part of the gang who now runs UNIT HQ in the 2020s, I only have to look at her for a few seconds and all I can see is a precocious little brat with a mane of ginger ringlets that could easily find a home on Simba's head. I know that these feelings aren't warranted. Miss Langford is a very talented performer who has done nothing to deserve my negativity. But it's still there, nonetheless.

As they say in many a 'break up' up note, 'Sorry Bonnie; it's not you, it's me.'



Then again, she also has by far the worst scream of any companion in the history of the show. I'd rather run a cheese grater over my ears than listen to her particularly high-pitched shriek. I challenge you to name another companion who is better at perforating your eardrums. And before any of you start to attribute my dislike of Melanie Langford, or if you prefer Bonnie Bush, and explain away my feelings as being

'gingerist,' please let me take this opportunity to make it clear that I completely endorse and support all forms of inclusion within *Doctor Who*.

After many years of watching, I have recently come to the conclusion that there has only been a token amount of ginger representation within the show. Off the top of my head, when it comes to ticking that particular box, I can only think of Turlough, Mel, Amy Pond, and Donna. I went to the land of Google to see if there was anyone else and there was a suggestion that Jamie McCrimmon and Leela were also part of the same club, but I wouldn't class them as being full-on ginger. Either way, that's not a very long list for over 60 years of *Doctor Who*! I'm sure you'll agree that more needs to be done. In the last two seasons, with all the additional Disney money for special effects and hair dye, RTD had a wonderful opportunity to tip this balance onto a much more enlightened and inclusive path...

The new Davros, for instance, didn't need to be up and about on two legs. He could have just stayed in his chair while sporting a full head of ginger curls.



You could also change the apparently offensive term of 'Celestial' and replace it with the intriguing, 'The Ginger Toymaker'.

The reimagined version of Rose could have been transitioning into ginger. This would surely have gained the same amount of publicity while still being a controversial choice amongst the fans. There would also have been a chance that the ginger might have been able to act.

If Sutekh really needed to come back as a CGI doggy – why not make his fur ginger?

And if the decision had been made to allow Omega to keep his original costume from *The Three Doctors*... how about opening that oversized mask and revealing an empty void that comes with a hue of ginger?

That's a lot of wasted opportunities, Mr Davies! You could have made a real difference to the 6% of ginger-haired people that currently roam these lands. But the chance was missed! And now it's gone forever. You should take a long look at yourself in the mirror.

As *Delta and the Bannermen* reaches its final act, things are really starting to heat up. In the face-to-face confrontation between the Doctor and Gavrok, we get a really nice example of the angry little speeches that the seventh incarnation often launched at his enemies:

"Give me Delta... and I will give you... your life."

"Life. What do you know about life, Gavrok! You deal in death! Lies, treachery, murder are your currency. You promise life, but in the end, it will be life that defeats you!"

Admittedly, there's not too much to go on here, just a glimpse at best, but we do get to see some positive signs of how Sylvester McCoy is going to develop his portrayal of the Doctor over the next two seasons. It's also important to note, for those of you who enjoy a random fact, that this was the story where the Seventh Doctor's iconic question mark umbrella made its first appearance. For his part in the scene, Don Henderson plays Gavrok with a quietly understated menace. The only thing that's arch about his performance are the tips of his eyebrows, which have both been twisted into points. They are not 'attack' eyebrows, if an image of Peter Capaldi has suddenly come into your mind; I'd be more inclined to say they're eyebrows of the 'evil' variety. But I'm not entirely sure about that point, so you'd be better off asking them yourself.

Gavrok allows the Doctor to escape with Mel and Burton, and we get more scenes with the Vincent Motorcycle and sidecar. I can't get over how young Sylvester McCoy looks as he rides the bike and sends it whizzing through the Welsh countryside. If you look closely during these scenes, there are a

couple of occasions in the long shots where Sylvester's glasses appear and then quickly disappear. There's also a brief shot of Bonnie Langford squealing with delight, after the bike flies over a hill and then lands with an unexpected bump. It's clear that the cast were all willing to muck in and go above and beyond their roles in the production. The sense of fun and the almost boundless energy that they put into their performances, are by a considerable way the best thing about the adventure.

While the Doctor is on his way back to the house of the bee keeping Goronwy, the oldest serving agents on the books of the C.I.A. have got themselves into something of a pickle. Hawk and Weismuller have been taken prisoner by the Bannermen. They are subsequently locked into the strangest type of neck bondage gear that I have ever seen. This comes after an earlier interlude when they're bickering as their silhouettes move behind the canvas of their tent at night, which had me instantly giggling like a child, because I couldn't get *Brokeback Mountain* out of my mind. Fortunately, the two Bannermen guards who've been watching over the C.I.A. buddies go off to intercept and put a tracker on the Doctor. It seems that Gavrok planned this all along, as a means of finally being led to the alien queen. Out of nowhere, Ray arrives on her moped. She releases Hawk and Weismuller from their very brief captivity, thanks to the Allen Key that just so happens to be lurking in her pocket. I can't help but like Ray and I think that Sara Griffiths does a really good job in the role. She comes across as being a 'no fuss or nonsense' type of character, but there's not really that much to her, other than the fact that she's wide-eyed and Welsh. At one point during the production, Ray was being considered as a replacement for Mel. And while I thoroughly approve of anything that removes Mel from my sight, I believe that the choice of the soon-to-be-wonderful Ace, as the next companion to hop aboard the TARDIS, was a far better fit for the Seventh Doctor.

Back at Goronwy's house, the beekeeper is busy giving 'Billy the Dish' a lesson about the properties of royal jelly. Apparently, if you administer a small dose to an ordinary worker bee, there's a very strong chance that it will change the insect into a queen.

Billy then puts two and two together and makes five. He consumes the concoction that Delta has used to feed the baby in the hope of being changed into a Chimeron. Incidentally, by this time, the baby has progressed through childhood and is now a woman in her forties who has embarked on a somewhat disappointing career as a high school geography teacher. Or at least, something along those lines.

The Doctor and what appears to be pretty much the entire cast are now gathered at the beekeeper's lodgings — little knowing that they have been followed by the two Bannermen who fired a tracking device onto the Doctor's motorbike. These Bannermen try to launch a surprise attack on Delta, but they are foiled by a warning cry from the 40-year-old geography girl, which sends them into painful spasms. For a time, it appears that the danger has passed, but Gavrok and the rest of the Bannermen have already set off and are on their way. Using a combination of Goronwy's bees and 10,000 jars of stored honey, the Doctor sets a trap for the fast-approaching enemy. He then orders an Uber for himself and the rest of his friends, and they head back to the Shangri-La. After landing his spaceship, Gavrok heads to the now-empty house, which they proceed to attack. Thinking that Delta has taken refuge somewhere in the gaff, they storm into a storage room and then fall into the Doctor's trap. The waiting shelves, which are so fragile that they wobble about when even a mouse breathes upon them, collapse upon the villains. Gavrok and his men are covered in honey from the falling jars. They end up being swarmed by the angry bees that have come from Goronwy's hives. After arriving back at the holiday camp, the Doctor attempts to find safety for himself and the others within the walls of his TARDIS, but he is stopped by a trap of the booby variety which Gavrok has placed upon the time machine. With no other options available, the Time Lord and Billy set up a sound system on top of one of the Shangri-La's buildings. They hope that playing the ear-piercing dirge of Coldplay's latest album will be enough to send the badly stung Bannermen packing. When the



and look really closely at the adventure, of the improvements that will come in Sylvester McCoy's next two seasons. Andrew Cartmel, the Script Editor of this era, will make the Seventh Doctor into a darker and more mysterious character who often manipulates those around him. Ace is going to arrive with her Nitro-9. And we're going to be treated to stories like *Remembrance of the Daleks*, *The Greatest Show in the Galaxy*, *Battlefield*, and *The Curse of Fenric*.

speaker is destroyed, the alien princess/geography teacher saves the day by letting out one of her amplified screams. Much like listening to Coldplay, this unholy noise sends the Bannermen into fits of pain and anguish, which swiftly brings their attack to an end. As his men continue to writhe in agony, Gavrok is so traumatised by the first few bars of *Clocks* that he falls into his own trap and is killed.

Hooray for soft contemporary rock with a social message and an uplifting chorus!

Sometime later, the Doctor and his friends all gather to say goodbye. Billy is now well on the way to becoming a fully-fledged member of the Chimeron race. He prepares to leave with Delta and the princess on Gavrok's spaceship, little-knowing that the females of his newly acquired species are inclined to kill and eat the males. Actually, that's not in any way true, but you can hope, can't you? As a parting gift, Billy decides to give his Vincent bike to Ray, and they both promptly ride off into their separate futures. If you ask me, Ray's well shot of him! The Doctor and Mel bid their farewells to Burton, Hawk, and Weismuller. Then, as the TARDIS dematerialises, Goronwy makes a point of turning towards the camera and winking at the audience.

Yes, you've guessed it, he's actually an incarnation of the Rani, breaking the fourth wall, just like the Flood woman. I won't go into it now, but the clues are all there: you just need to play all of these episodes backwards and drink a litre of gin.

So, what do I really think about *Delta and the Bannermen*? Well, to be fair it's not great, but that's fine. There's nothing wrong with a bit of fluff! And if nothing else, when it comes to nostalgia, I must admit to being a complete addict. So, all's pretty much well and good. There are also signs, if you squint

And yet, as I think back, hating *Delta* as much as I did at the time, I came really close to switching off and walking away from all things *Doctor Who*. I've felt much the same recently! The two eras, whether it was McCoy's first season or the last two that I've endured of the Fifteenth Doctor, have really dented my love for the programme. But when you've cared about something for so long, it's hard to cut all ties. I can't. And to be honest, I'm still glad that I've stayed and kept the faith. At the moment, the love is a little dimmer than it was before. I'll own up and say that my long-time companion and I are currently estranged. But it's only a trial separation. We just need to give it some time, have a bit of counselling on the matter, and wait for things to 'get good' again. I hope that you all feel the same way. If you've read this far, you've already shown your devotion. I'm now off to put my Navarino model on eBay. I've been told that the turds are some of the most sought-after figurines that you can buy; collectors apparently fight over them and push their prices up to astronomical amounts, so there's a really good chance that I'm about to make my fortune.



# Reviewed: Inside No 9's Stage Fright, Starring Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith

Philip Bates

I suspect many *Doctor Who* fans love *Inside No. 9*, the anthology drama created and written by Steve Pemberton (*Silence in the Library/ Forest of the Dead*) and Reece Shearsmith (*Sleep No More*) that somewhat defies definition but most frequently indulges in horror and comedy. The pair did, appropriately, nine seasons of the TV series, starring a huge number of incredible guests, then concluded its run, knowing the adage that it's most important to leave the audience wanting more.

That's where *Stage/Fright* comes in, the theatrical culmination of the franchise that's currently being staged at the Wyndham's Theatre in London's West End. It is, however, very difficult to talk about, so great is the shroud of secrecy that surrounds it. And we'll adhere to Shearsmith and Pemberton's wishes and not spoil anything.

What I can say, though, is that *Stage/Fright* is one of the best plays I've ever seen. It's ingenious. It's joyous. It's scary. It's everything you expect from the talented twosome, and more.

It begins with one premise that establishes, firstly, that Wyndham's is haunted, and secondly, that Pemberton and Shearsmith know theatre inside-out. The whole production plays with, and revels in, conventions brilliantly. The attention to detail is incredible, as is the level of consideration: they have particular fun with a hand-held camera, which of course later goes on to freak out both the audience and one of the actors; but it's also used to share an important part of the drama with anyone on the balcony or circle – the camera is rested on the stage at one point, directed at a dark part of the aisle, so when a supposed usher there explains to the rest of the cast about the ghost that treads the boards, the actor is seen on the big screen, as if accidental. Few other theatrical

productions give such thought to anyone in the gods, while making it appear completely natural.

(There's also a glorious moment where the camera is turned on the audience, so we see a few of us on the big screen – before it flickers and shows, instead, an empty auditorium.)

In some ways, it's a show-within-a-show-within-a-show (and you can possibly add another "within-a-show" in there). It's gruesome and hilarious: typically, a terrifying moment is followed just a second later with something that makes you laugh out loud. It's a truly extraordinary thing.

*Stage/Fright* does touch on some of the greatest hits of the TV show, notably *Bernie Clifton's Dressing Room* – with a nod to the first two episodes, *Sardines* and *A Quiet Night In* – which, curiously enough, happens to be the first *Inside No. 9* I saw. No wonder I fell for the show straight away. *Bernie Clifton's Dressing Room* is a high point in a programme full of peaks. The show is everything TV should be; and *Stage/Fright* – funny, surprising, terrifying, poignant *Stage/Fright* – is everything theatre should be. But how could the West End otherwise hope to match the offerings of Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith? They're overwhelming talents, and everyone watching seemed wowed by the experience.

This may be the end for *Inside No. 9*, but it goes out on the biggest high imaginable, and I can't wait to see what this team does next. Whatever it is, I'll be there, and you should be too.

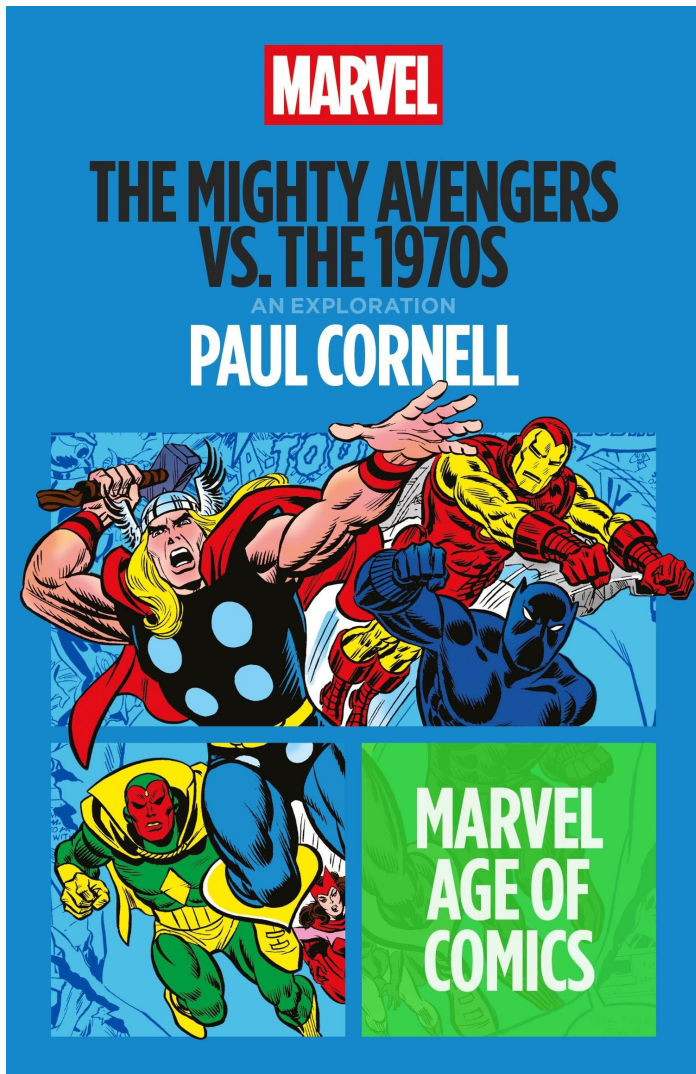
***Inside No 9: Stage/Fright* plays at the Hammersmith Apollo in January 2026.**



# Reviewed: The Mighty Avengers vs. the 1970s

## Written by Paul Cornell

Philip Bates



I can't be certain, but it's surely true that there's a huge crossover between fans of *Doctor Who* and fans of Marvel. For me, my love of Marvel started when I was three; *Doctor Who*, then, is something of a secondary love, despite me editing a *Doctor Who* site and writing and editing related books. Nonetheless, my love for Marvel runs exceedingly deep. That's why my ears pricked up when I heard about a new series of books from Bloomsbury assessing various aspects of the comics, including Daredevil's rightly-lauded *Born Again* storyline, the history of Dr Strange, and *The Mighty Avengers vs. the 1970s*, written by *Doctor Who*'s very own Paul Cornell.

Of course, *Who* fans will know Cornell for writing *Father's Day* and *Human Nature/ The Family of Blood*, as well as other multimedia stories. But he has written comics too, including *Wolverine*, *Black Widow: Deadly Origin*, and *Captain Britain and MI:13*. He's an unusual choice for writing a Marvel non-fiction book, I'd say, but it was pleasant to see his name crop up here.

The mission statement of *The Mighty Avengers vs. the 1970s* seems to be to create something of an overview of *Avengers* comics of the era, with chapters largely but not exclusively named after lead writers on the title. It's a fine enough idea, especially as so much can change in a decade, and the 1970s was an interesting time for Marvel's superteam. During the Seventies, we had a number of much-loved stories, like the *Kree/ Skrull War*, *The Celestial Madonna Saga*, and the *Avengers/Defenders War*. This is a juicy time for the *Avengers* and for comic book fans.

And yet this is a very dry, dull, and confusing book. Very little about it works. It's not engaging and seems to misunderstand its audience. Instead of a fascinating and enthusiastic assessment, *The Mighty Avengers vs. the 1970s* rushes through important points, misses others, focuses on things hardly worth mentioning, and approaches things in very odd ways. The fact he calls the well-known *Korvac Saga* "the Michael Saga" is a small thing, but it is indicative of a wider problem with the book: something just keeps jarring the reader, almost all the time.

Take, for instance, a page talking about the wedding of Mantis and Swordsman... which would raise the eyebrows of many MCU fans whose only experience of the

characters respectively comes from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films and the *Hawkeye* and *Daredevil: Born Again* Season 1 shows. “They’re married alongside Wanda and the Vision,” Cornell tells us, “the ceremony being presided over by Immortus, a happier and wiser version of Kang. When the Swordsman died, Kang felt unable to escape his destiny to keep attacking the Avengers. Here he is at peace and the Swordsman is (in a sense) alive. The underlying theme is very powerful; nobody is ‘impure’; nobody is doomed by their past; a sex worker can still be ‘the perfect woman,’ can still become a divine being.”

What?! Where did that come from? If the last bit caught you unawares, leaving you with considerable whiplash, you’re not the only one. Where did sex workers come into the equation?!

It’s baffling, at the best of times.

That isn’t to say I didn’t learn anything from the book; primarily, I was amazed at how young the likes of Roy Thomas and Jim Shooter were when they were handed the reins. Their outputs are mature and grabbing, belying their youth – or perhaps

because of their youth. As they were in their twenties when they were in charge of the *Avengers*, they knew what worked in comics, knew when to push boundaries, and brought an incredible zeal to the series. *The Mighty Avengers vs. the 1970s* brings only a small fraction of this energy, though Cornell has clearly done a great deal of research, likely re-reading every issue of that decade, and loves it.

It seems, however, that he’s partly ashamed of that love. He apologises for things that happened in this era time and time again, frequently noting with some embarrassment that “this was the 1970s, after all”. Yes, we know that; we know times change – there’s no need to get so hung up about it.

There are comparatively few non-fiction books about Marvel that I hoped this would be a joyous, interesting, eye-opening tome, but instead, it’s a bit of a struggle to get through. It’s a shame because Cornell seems a nice guy and most of his *Doctor Who* work is great; this is a departure, though not a good one. *The Mighty Avengers vs. the 1970s* should fizz with vibrancy and love, but it’s a very disappointing, jarring read.

significantly empowers her, making her the one threat (other than his ‘human’ weakness) that can defeat Ultron. (The image below was coloured by Shooter himself.)

Rather wonderfully, the only reason Wanda doesn’t save the day single-handed on that occasion is that Captain America gets in the way. This happens again with Wonder Man yelling at Ms. Marvel to ‘get to safety’ in #172, despite the fact that she’s just swatted the villain Tyrak with a lamp post. He thus gets himself zapped.

Shooter’s Ms. Marvel (still with her own title when she starts appearing in *Avengers*) is enormously confident and competent. Her professional attitude and actions are the start of a new feeling for super hero comics, one that in later decades was to become the dominant mode in *Avengers*: the idea that heroes might not be talented



amateurs, vaguely accepted by the authorities, but instead work procedurally and with responsibility, thinking like cops or soldiers. During the aforementioned Tyrak battle, Wonder Man thinks Carol is ‘the most aggressive person’ he’s ever seen, that she doesn’t just strike a pose and point like Wanda or Wasp, but ‘hauls off and belts people... like a man would!’ Clint, on the other hand, still having learned nothing, feels being punched out by Tyrak ought to take Carol down a peg. (In #175 he asks ‘what do we need blondie for?’ to which Moondragon points out that his superpower is shooting arrows.) Wonder Man’s awkward willingness to listen earns Carol saying to him that a ‘hunk like him might be worth educating’. Shooter’s Wasp is also full of agency and charisma, trying desperately to look after Henry and establishing a life of her own, creating a fashion show in #167. She ends that issue, her launch having been ruined by a super villain battle, by telling the cheery Nighthawk to ‘sit on it’, though this was the year when *Happy Days*, where that snappy comeback originated, created the concept of ‘jumping the shark’. Shooter gives Jan an exuberant, celebrity personality, with her often being the first one to introduce the group, and adding ‘I’m the Wasp!’ She also gets vastly increased powers (courtesy of that visit to *Marvel Team-Up* under writer Chris Claremont), now capable of knocking out a foe on her own with her sting. She says in #166 that only Henry gets away

# UNIT's SNAFU Christmas Bash

Peter Shaw



*"Wish I could be dancing now  
In the arms of the girl I love  
...Wish I was at home for Christmas."*

Jona Lewie, Stop The Cavalry

Sergeant Benton gazed mournfully into the Mess Hall window. Between the steam of sweat and booze on the glass, and the tinsel that adorned the frame, he could just about make out Captain Mike Yates disco dancing with dishy Corporal Bell. Benton sighed. It was a fancy dress party, and the theme was 'alien invasion' or 'mad scientist'. Mike, Benton's senior officer (a fact he was never allowed to forget), had borrowed a lab coat from Stuart Hyde from the Newton Institute, slicked back and spiked his hair, and was wearing the biggest comedy Elton John glasses he could find.

Corporal Bell found this hilarious. She was dressed as an Axon in a tight-fitting, full-length, yellow-and-white patterned body stocking. Her head and shoulders shone with the gold makeup, and her glittering wig finished the alluring ensemble. She was quite the belle of the ball. But she only had eyes for Mike Yates.

Benton sighed again and put his hand in his camouflage field jacket pocket. Somehow, he'd missed the briefing about fancy dress (or Yates had 'neglected to inform him') and didn't have time even to change into civvies. He felt a bit of a twit as everyone, even the Brigadier, had gone to town with their outfits. UNIT's commanding officer looked quite resplendent in the frilly shirt and purple velvet suit he'd borrowed from the Doctor. "The maddest scientist I know," he proclaimed when making his grand entrance, to cheers and great hilarity. No one even noticed Benton slip in, then slip out again.

He felt an alien object in his jacket pocket and pulled the small rectangular box out: a packet of cigars. *Oh yes*, Benton remembered: he'd tactically acquired them when rooting about the Doctor's laboratory looking for the Christmas decorations. Probably confiscated from the Master. He took a stogie out, lit it with a lucifer, and began to puff. After all, it was Christmas. Benton coughed and spluttered for several seconds, then threw the lit cigar into the snow, where it fizzled out. *Feels familiar*, he thought.

The evening had not started well for Sgt Benton. He was in charge of decorating the Mess for the UNIT Christmas bash. Mike Yates was busy hob-nobbing with Havoc, the party band they'd booked for the night, and the DJ, Mr Maestro. Corporal Bell was preparing the Christmas punch using a recipe left by Jo Grant. It was a heady mix of rum, sparkling wine, and Angostura bitters. Unfortunately, instead of lemonade, Jo had written 'limoncello', transforming it from heady to near deadly. Now, it wasn't so much a punch as a right hook. While Mike, the boys from Havoc, and Corporal Bell enthusiastically imbibed the lethal liquid, Benton was up a ladder, decking the hall with baubles and fairy lights.

When he descended to admire his handiwork, a blissfully blitzed Captain Yates complained there was no tinsel. Benton explained there was none in the decorations box.

"Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without tinsel," grumbled Ms Bell, lying on the rug (having drunk her fill of Punch). That was enough for Mike, who snapped into military mode and ordered Benton to go and find the shiny festive adornment immediately. Preferably sooner. Benton left forthwith, overhearing Yates use his old RHIP line (Rank Has Its Privileges), which he always deploys to belittle Benton and impress the ladies. He really was Captain Hilarity.

Benton rooted around UNIT HQ to no avail. He searched through the depot, but there was no sign; the quartermaster's store yielded nothing either (not even snakes as big as garden rakes). Eventually, Benton found himself rooting through filing cabinets, as if he was ever going to find tinsel stashed among the files and files of reports in triplicate.

At his wits' end, Benton made a last-ditch search of the Doctor's lab. Unusually, it was left open. The Doctor had zoomed off in Bessie, alerted by some kind of pressing matter in London. "Television Centre", Benton thought he muttered. Maybe he was joining Roy Castle for an emergency record-breaking tap-dance routine.

About to admit defeat and make a tactical withdrawal to the Naafi, Benton stumbled over a box marked 'specimens', 'do not open', and 'highly dangerous'. But, poking out of the lid was unmistakably some multi-coloured shiny Christmas tinsel. The Doc had clearly used an old specimen box to store his Christmas decorations. Or kooky Jo Grant had badmined them, more likely. Rather than face a furious Captain Yates, Benton hatched a plan to tactically acquire the tinsel for the Christmas bash, then deploy it back in the lab before the

Doc even knew it's been half-inched. Using the lock-picking espionage training that he very nearly passed, Benton was able to open the box. It helped that it wasn't actually locked in the first place.

Now, outside in the cold, with not even a cigar to lighten his mood, Benton wished he'd gone AWOL and headed home with his dear Mam for Christmas. The shrieks of jollity emanating from the dance floor only piled on Benton's misery. *Hang on*, he thought... *That's not jollity. More like screams of terror.* Benton pressed his nose against the window to get a better view. It was a nightmare scene.

Mr Maestro's disco music was still on full blast. But the partygoers weren't dancing; they were battling. Yates, Bell, the assembled soldiers, and even the Havoc band members all had tinsel wrapped around their necks. The tinsel was tightening, inch by inch, strangling the assembled revellers to the tune of Golden Brown.

*'Golden brown, texture like sun  
Lays me down, with my mind she runs  
Throughout the night  
No need to fight  
Never a frown with golden brown...'*

Benton burst in through the doors and grabbed the hefty scissors he'd used to cut the paper chains. Starting with Corporal Bell and ending with Mike Yates, he snipped the strangulating tinsel, which then writhed like snakes on the ground. It was very nearly murder on the dance floor. The fancy-dressed partygoers were then forced into a huddle in the centre of the hall as the flailing tinsel surrounded them, preparing for another assault. Just then, the Doctor burst into the room, wielding one of his Heath Robinson-like contraptions which whizzed, popped, and emitted a high-pitched wailing sound. In response, the tinsel snakes twirled and writhed in seeming agony — until they finally became immobile.

"How on earth did this happen?" he explained.

"We don't know, but Sergeant Benton saved us. He's the hero of the hour!" explained Corporal Bell. Benton smiled for the first time that evening and gave a knowing look to Captain Mike Yates.

"But which ham-fisted bun vendor stole the sentient, killer tinsel from my laboratory?" the Doctor barked back.

"Also Sergeant Benton," Mike quickly replied. "What are those things?"

"They are the Auton's latest development. Just imagine that tinsel in every home in the

country! But who activated them?”

Behind him, the Doctor heard a familiar evil cackle as Mr Maestro made a swift exit into a door in the suspiciously large speaker no one had noticed in the corner. “Until we meet again, Doctor,” the sinister DJ exclaimed, removing a latex mask. “And thanks for all your help, the resourceful Sergeant Benton!”

The party now over, all the traumatised revellers quickly exited the crime scene, leaving a despondent Benton to clear up, while the Doctor gathered his specimens.

“Cheer up, old chap,” the Doctor said. “You were only following orders.”

“People could have been killed.”

“But they weren’t, thanks to your quick thinking.”

“And because I hadn’t quaffed any of Jo’s punch!” They both laughed. “Do you think any of that tinsel is in people’s houses?” Benton asked. “I might phone my mother...”

“I don’t know. That’s why I visited Television Centre. Something odd is going on there... I checked the sign-in book: 5,678 people were in today. But I could only detect 5,675 life forms. Human life forms that is.”

“What were the other three?”

“At a guess, Auton replicas!”

“Do you think they’re planning to transmit something on television that will activate the killer tinsel?”

“That’s what I suspect, a transmission signal from Television Centre. But at long range – across the country – you need two more things. Some sort of metal antenna, preferably with the tinsel wrapped around it.”

Benton had a rare brainwave. “Like a metal coat hanger? Or a few?”

“That would do...” the Doctor replied.

“What’s the other thing?”

“Heat; preferably small, intense heat at close range.”

“Like a candle. Or four candles?”

“Fork handles!” the Doctor laughed. “Yes, that would work. Why?”

“Have you got your Whomobile charged up?”

“My what?”

“Sorry, that’s what the lads call it. Your flying car?”

“Of course!” said the Doctor.

“Well, let’s hop in and get down to TV centre Studio 1, pronto!”

“Why there?”

“That’s where they film *Blue Peter*, and they are lighting the last Advent Crown tomorrow! We’ve got to stop them. I never trusted that Peter Purves! And I can’t believe John and Val would betray us! But they may be your Autons.”

“What on earth are you blathering on about, Sargent Benton? I’ve never heard such arrant nonsense!”

“Let’s just get going, Doc. I’ll explain later!”

And with that, Benton marched out of the room, again the hero of the hour. And for once, with the Doctor trailing after *him*...



**Merry Christmas to all,  
And to all, a good-night... !**

