

THE DOCTOR WHO COMPANION

ANNUAL 2025



Welcome to the Doctor Who Companion Annual 2025

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

This year, we've got the first festive *Doctor Who* special by Steven Moffat since 2017. On Christmas Day, we have *Joy to the World*, the second Christmas special with Ncuti Gatwa as the Fifteenth Doctor.

If you're missing Millie Gibson's Ruby Sunday, we've a nice little catch-up short story in the middle of the 2025 *DWC* Annual. First, however, we open with a tale featuring Amy and Rory, post-*The Angels Take Manhattan*, plus reviews of every episode of *Doctor Who* Series 14, from *The Church on Ruby Road* to *Empire of Death*.

Later on, you'll find articles about the Seventh Doctor's jumper, Tony Stokes' earliest *Doctor Who* memory, *Blakes 7*, *The Tomb of the Cybermen*, the Fifteenth Doctor action figurine, and the *New Series Adventures* novels, as well as a quiz to find out if you're *really* a true fan. We round off with a lovely story with the Sixth Doctor and Mel Bush. A special thank you to my gorgeous girlfriend, Tabi, for all her help.

And of course, thank you to everyone who's contributed to this annual, and to the site in general. Plus, an extra thank you to all our readers, whether you're a newbiew or a seasoned *DWC* reader — we couldn't be here without you.

Over the festivities, we've plenty of features and reviews lined up, alongside all our usual news coverage.. So stay tuned!

Don't forget to watch *Joy to the World*, on Christmas Day too.

Until next time, then...

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Philip Bates,

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

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

Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft!

Peter Shaw



“Calling occupants of interplanetary craft! Calling occupants of interplanetary craft that have been observing our planet EARTH. We of IFSB wish to make contact with you. We are your friends, and would like you to make an appearance here on EARTH. Your presence before us will be welcomed with the utmost friendship. We will do all in our power to promote mutual understanding between your people and the people of EARTH.

“Please come in peace and help us in our EARTHLY problems. Give us some sign that you have received our message. Be responsible for creating a miracle here on our planet to wake up the ignorant ones to reality.

“Let us hear from you. We are your friends.”

(A telepathic message transmitted into outer space by members of the International Flying Saucer Bureau on the first World Contact Day, 15 March 1953.)

“Good morning neighbours, this is Big John on the phone-in line here on WRF AM, the ‘Talk of New York City’. We’ll be with you from 12am to 5am. And, as we wake up to a new day, I’d like to be the first to wish you all a Merry Christmas! We still have a week or so left of 1953, so I won’t be saying Happy New Year just yet...”

Amy Pond was used to nights like these, alone with the radio. She’d had enough years now to settle into her life in post-war New York. Rock’n’Roll was starting to hot up, but it will be a long slog to reach Lady Gaga, if she even manages to make it that far.

Rory was working night shifts at Bellevue Hospital. He’d managed to swerve Christmas Eve for the last few years but this year, he won’t be back home until the early hours of Christmas morning. Amy was a girl who was used to waiting. She knew she wouldn’t sleep

until her husband was home. In any case, Big John's phone-in was her guilty pleasure.

The radio show covered a mix of anomalous phenomena, UFOs, and other offbeat topics. It felt faintly nostalgic, and somewhat naive, to hear people phone in with stories about flying saucers and little green men. This is the girl who battled Weeping Angels on Alfava Metraxis and was forced to wait 36 years in quarantine on the planet Apalapucia. She got the years back, of course. Maybe she'll get these years back too. But for that, she'd need a Doctor...

"Tonight we're going to take your calls about alien encounters in your neighbourhood. Always a popular and interesting discussion. If your story has a festive twist, then all the better. As usual, you have to convince me it wasn't a fever dream, an optical illusion, or your neighbour out with a torch taking his nighttime ablutions."

Big John was a sceptic. And Amy sympathised with him. Most 'extraterrestrial experiences' usually turn out to be hoaxes or hysteria. Except when they're not. Like when the Atraxi, the Cybermen, the Daleks, the Silurians, the Sontarans, the Vashta Nerada, the Weeping Angels, and the Zygons all assembled at Stonehenge to trap the Doctor in the Pandorica in 102 AD. But that was a fairly exceptional occurrence.

The first caller, Mavis from Cooperstown, NY, seemed to be in the hysterical, possibly intervention-needing camp.

"Oh Lord! Big John! There I was, minding my own business when a bright light descended on little old me from the heavens," Mavis explained. "I found I couldn't move as these small, blue aliens emerged from this huge metal saucer saying 'beep-beep'. They took me aboard their ship and poked and prodded me. I woke up back in my field, feeling like I'd been through a mangle. My husband Ronnie... well, he just laughed, but I knew what happened was God's truth. The aliens are out there, and they want to communicate with us."

That was the first of many calls that morning. Amy could tell Big John was going through the motions, saddled, as he was, with a series of less-than-thrilling callers. Most with variations of Mavis' story: lights, aliens, spaceship, probe, then home to disbelief. It was now well past 4am and Amy pondered drifting off to sleep. At least then she'd wake to see Rory's stupid face.

Amy's waning mind started filling with visions of legions of nubile Roman soldiers. The invasion of the hot Italians was always a dream-time favourite. But her reverie was interrupted by a voice as familiar as the aroma of Jammy Dodgers and Artron energy...

"Hello Big John! Long-time listener, first-time caller. In fact, I've been listening to your show from the start until it ended in 1976. They should have let you carry on until they released

Close Encounters of the Third Kind a year later. Whole new audience. Still, everything seems easier in foresight.”

Big John couldn't be more delighted: this sounded like the sort of maniac caller that livened up the twilight hours. Some sort of British looney tune who thought he was from the future.

“Hello, caller. What's your name and how can we help you this morning?”

“Why do people always ask for names? It confuses things when you don't use one. Just call me the Doctor.”

“Just... Doctor?”

“Doctor, well...” The Doctor paused to think of a plausible explanation for his lack of a moniker. Something he's failed to do for more than 900 years. So why he assumed he'd be able to explain it live on the radio is anyone's guess.

“Okay, Doctor Well, tell us your story...” said Big John.

The Doctor supposed it was as good a name as any at this moment. “It's more of a message, really. It's a reply to a message that you put out.”

“I don't remember putting out a message,” Big John replied.

“Not you *you*. The human race *you*. More specifically the International Flying Saucer Bureau. I tried but they're not answering their telephone. I suppose because it's Christmas and they're all drinking eggnog, surrounded by baubles and panettone. Trouble is, in their message, they didn't tell the aliens not to contact them during the holidays.”

“You are in contact with aliens?”

“So are you, right now. Well, one alien. And you are an alien to me. But if you mean the 'aliens' who replied to the message: yes. I'm here with them now.”

“Where are you?”

“I tried to take them to your studios in New York but we got a little lost. So we've ended up here. Somewhere called Cooperstown? Mavis says hi. She's making them coffee.”

“The aliens?”

“I think they prefer the term 'visitors' or 'occupants of interplanetary craft,’” said the Doctor.

“Can we speak to them?”

“Not really, all you will hear is some beep-beep noises. That's why they asked me to call in and translate. I'll put one on...”

“*Beep-beep. Beep-beep. Beep. Beep,*” declared the alien, excitedly, in strange, grating

tones.

“See what I mean?”

Big John was delighted at this interlude. The guy was obviously a madman. But he made convincing ‘alien’ noises.

“What they said was,” the Doctor continued, “they come in peace and want to help you with your earthly problems. The message they received didn’t specify what the problems were. But they are happy to help with whatever.”

Meanwhile, Amy couldn’t believe her ears. She was scouring a map of New York state. Cooperstown was around a three-hour drive from central NYC. But she’d need Rory to come home with the car.

“Is this the message sent from the IFSB on Contact Day?” Big Jon asked the Doctor. “We had a special programme for that. But that was back in March...”

“Yes. It takes a while to travel 6.2465 light-years. But they had a good run once they cleared the congestion after Alpha Centauri. That’s why it only took nine months.”

“Okay, Doctor Well, can you describe these visitors to me?”

“I suppose you’d call them little blue men with three heads.”

Big John was holding back the guffaws. “What do they need three heads for?”

“One for thinking, one for speaking, and another for eating. It makes sense if you think about it: that way you don’t end up talking a load of nonsense while spitting food everywhere.”

Amy was frantically phoning the hospital to get Rory back. He’d already left. This could be their chance.

“And have they come in a flying saucer?” enquired Big John.

“It’s chunkier than that. A flying bidet? Or a ramekin? Yes, that sounds more distinctive: a flying ramekin.”

“Okay, Doctor Well,” said Big John. “What do you call these creatures?”

“Visitors, please! They’re called the Hokes.”

“Ah, very good.” Big John allowed himself a chuckle. “I knew this was a ‘hoax’ call. I was just playing along!”

“No, not ‘hoax’. They are called the Hokes, roughly translated. H-O-K-E-S.”

“From the planet Prank, I suppose!”

“No, from Fulnenrestoraximal 14, stupid!” The Doctor was annoyed now.

Big John decided it was time to wrap up. “Well, it’s been great to have you on the show. I’m sure our listeners enjoyed this little Christmas treat.”

From the call from Cooperstown, listeners could hear the unmistakable howls of a convoy of police car sirens. In the distance, over the frightened ‘beep-beeps’, they could just make out an exchange between the Doctor and Mavis.

“What do you mean Ronnie called the cops? Ronnie! I told you it’s not threatening. That’s just the way they drink. Don’t worry, Mavis. It wasn’t your fault. Drink up your coffee, chaps — it’s time we were off.”

The Doctor picked up the phone again to the radio station. “Sorry Big John. We’ve got to scam. Typical humans! You invite outer space visitors, say they will be welcomed as friends... Then you start pointing Smith and Wessons at them. I’ve got to go; they promised me a lift back to the TARDIS on the leisure satellite Hoodwink IV. That’s where I’ve left the Ponds to enjoy a zero-gravity spa day.”

It all came rushing back to Amy, the Doctor slinking off while they were both being massaged by a six-armed, three-headed blue being. Sorted her cricked neck out, though.

Suddenly, a wave of disappointment flooded over Amy Pond. That may have been her only chance. But no. It was locked into her past anyway, so it would only have caused another paradox. One more of those around here could be terminal.

“Goodbye Doctor Well,” said Big John. “Look after those little blue men. Any last message to the listeners, Doctor?”

“Yes,” the Doctor replied as he hurtled up the spaceship’s ramp. “A happy Christmas to all of you at home!”

With a sombre click, Amy turned off the radio. “Raggedy man. Happy Christmas.”

Before she had a chance to wallow, Rory sauntered through the door.

“Thought you’d be asleep!” he said. “How’s things?”

Amy couldn't decide whether to tell her husband, or to let it go. In case it was too painful.

“I’ve just had the best Christmas present I could ever wish for,” said Amy.

“What’s that?”

She looked into Rory’s stupid face. “You coming home, of course!”

Rory gave Amy one of his ‘I can’t believe my luck’ faces and produced a single sprig of mistletoe. And a very happy Christmas was had by all.

Reviewed: The Church on Ruby Road

Philip Bates



There was a rather interesting section in *The Church on Ruby Road*, the first full episode with Ncuti Gatwa as the Fifteenth Doctor and introducing Millie Gibson as Ruby Sunday. No, I don't mean the singing; nor the time-rewriting stuff, or even the mystery around Ruby herself. I'm talking about the Doctor pondering new languages. It was somewhat tongue-in-cheek nonsense about learning the language of "rope", but in amongst it, we experienced a new way of approaching *Doctor Who*. It's a rather convoluted and difficult thing to get a grasp on, full of contradictions and things that make you squirm, but that's language for you. You won't find either *Doctor Who* or rope on Duolingo, so for now, we've just got to go with it, see how this language progresses, and hope we can catch up before our new-found knowledge-base becomes anachronistic. Because for years now, we've been told that "*Doctor Who* is

about change", but it's not really, is it? For much of its history, the franchise has adapted, yes, but essentially stayed true to its origins. There's a clear line to be drawn between now and then; yet, like The Beatles' last track, we find that, with all the changes and with the absence of change, nonetheless we miss you, *Doctor Who*. What "*Doctor Who* is about change" likely means is that we change, so our relationship with the series changes as well – so too our views on stories, on themes, on that central character, and the overall narrative. Still, I find myself in a difficult position, admitting that that point of view was then; this is now, and our favourite sci-fi show isn't the same as it once was. Sometimes, you drift so gradually that you don't think to look up before it's much too late and you're a long way from the shore; other times, you're caught in this riptide and the land has vanished in an instant. And in some very rare cases, both things

happen, as is the case with *Doctor Who*.

What makes this period of the franchise so stark is that things feel so different despite there being a renewed hope that returning showrunner, Russell T Davies, would bring things full circle (full circle, that is, for 21st Century *Who*). But Davies is a different person now. Compare how you are now to how you were in 2005. This is only natural. So why and how does *The Church on Ruby Road* feel like both more of the same and something new? Why does it sit so awkwardly?

Davies does a lot of things that he's done before: perhaps most subtle (though I use that word very loosely when approaching

anything by the writer) is how new companion, Ruby, is part of a band with a trans person, a retread of Russell's *Rose* novelisation, which saw Mickey Smith in a band called Bad Wolf, led by a trans woman, Sally Salter. Less subtle is Ruby herself, who appears at first glance to be a generic companion – meaning a confident, sometimes sad, young, caring, pretty go-getter – for the Doctor and the audience to fixate on. Having never seen Gibson in anything before, I was certainly intrigued to see how she'd get on, and I was let down slightly by her tumultuous first scene in which she and Davina McCall have a curiously hectic TV interview. But she soon charmed me. The loud Northern façade hides a deeper performance and a lovely connection with our new Doctor.





There's a warmth to her that draws you in, although it's interesting that she never feels at home in her *actual home*. There's a clear love there between her, Carla (Michelle Greenidge), and Cherry (Angela Wynter), but her home doesn't feel very... homely. There aren't many trappings of everyday life there. That could be because Ruby is sadly the only one of Carla's foster children to stay there, to make it her home, so it feels a little like a transitional space. That coldness is only added to because Carla doesn't act the way she should: in writing that's shockingly uncharacteristic of Russell, she doesn't react as a normal person would when the Doctor, a complete stranger, wanders into her home after Ruby is erased. She's just... okay with it. Accepting. Despite the door being locked. (And the less said about the new sonic "screwdriver" the better.) That really jars.

Ruby's absence does hit hard though. The audience's realisation that she's gone surely comes much earlier than the Doctor's; similarly, we presume that the photos on the fridge will have also vanished before the Doctor makes this

revelation (if only because it was set up nicely, and Davies is much too good a writer to forget that key law of screenwriting: show, don't tell).

The Goblins are a strange creation too. They straddle the line between what *Doctor Who* does and what it doesn't do. Russell mentioned before that he's incorporating elements of fantasy (as a genre) into *Doctor Who*, and that makes me nervous – I simply don't connect with fantasy, and it troubles me that *Doctor Who* is straying farther away from the shore on which I'd contentedly found it. But the Goblins are just aliens. Swap them with Bok or the Zocci and there'd be very little difference. Oh sure, they sing, but so does the Doctor. Oh sure, they eat babies, but so do the giants in *The BFG*. They can, however, travel in time (no matter what the Doctor says), and that sets them apart, makes them a bigger threat than they initially seem. Actually, they should be a

bigger threat than they are, considering they just dissolve away once their King experiences the Timothy-Dalton-in-*Hot-Fuzz* treatment. As with most aliens in episodes that introduce companions, they're a gateway to our new dynamic.

Davies would've been safer going with an established threat, either a recognised foe or something that fits the standard alien invader outline, but you've got to admire his need to do things differently, even if not every note hits the right tone. Or indeed, even if a few knots can bring down the plot. This wasn't the strongest of narratives, but it swept along at a cracking pace with enough character beats for you to invest in these additions to the *Doctor Who* mythos. One of the most startling things about Russell is that he exudes enthusiasm from every pore, so it's just as surprising that *The Church on Ruby Road* doesn't fizz with refreshing notions. It's not *Doctor Who* as we expect it to be, but it's perhaps Davies as we expect him to be right now. It's interesting that someone so alive with notions is still very much set in a particular mindset. That's ironic, too, given the diatribe fed to us in *The Giggle* about the dangers of always thinking you're right. That isn't a criticism of Davies: he's one of the show's best ambassadors, and he will always have my utmost respect. I just find it *interesting*, in this strangely intangible way. That is likely the word I attach to the mixed bag that is *The Church on Ruby Road* most of all, and so far to Davies' return to *Doctor Who*: interesting.

And what of the elephant in the room? What of Ncuti Gatwa? Our Fifteenth Doctor? He's excellent. There's something fascinating about him, from his confidence and fragility (is he the first Doctor to cry in

his first full episode?) to even his accent and grin. You can see there's so much more going on behind those eyes. I didn't always buy it, sadly: the thing that stuck out like a sore thumb was his dancing in that nightclub. Why? Lots of Doctors have danced. The nightclub itself felt a strange move, but the thing that jarred most is that he looked... too cool? The Doctor is awkward! He's not human! There's a marked difference between the drunk giraffe the Eleventh Doctor showed off on a couple of occasions and the whirling storm the Fifteenth Doctor immediately is. The former is a storm that has the capacity to be a drunk giraffe; the latter hasn't demonstrated anything but his sure-footedness. I hope that's still to come because I like my Time Lord to be something *other*. And Gatwa is very capable of it.

Despite that bump in the road (and the awful bigeneration guff), he's the Doctor, and that in itself is an achievement so early on. Because when things went wrong, when the Goblins took Lulubelle, when Ruby disappeared, we knew things were going to be alright because the Doctor is here to fix them. Bizarrely, I didn't even feel that way with David Tennant's Fourteenth Doctor, who was so consistently on the back foot.

The Church on Ruby Road isn't my ideal *Doctor Who*: its semantics, phonology, and referents are all askew; I'm scrabbling around, looking for its foundations; and who the heck put that accent grave there?! But after watching it, I did feel this little frisson of energy, something that I've not truly felt since 2017. *Doctor Who* is back.

I might not be very good at it, but it's okay – I like learning new languages.

Reviewed: Space Babies

Ida Wood



For someone who grew up in an era of YouTubers pushing the boundaries of weird ideas in video form, in ways that appealed to impressionable and very creative children while leaving adults totally bemused and often shocked, I can't believe that *Doctor Who's* core television product has somehow gone a step beyond them in the pantheons of weirdness.

Often uber-weird content that makes you go 'I can't believe what I'm watching' achieves that effect by leaning on ideas that are outrageous because they willingly ignore social expectations and mock them to the point of trying to incite offence. Many (end of career) stand-up comedians attempt the outrageous ideas approach, but it falls flat because it is lacking the weirdness that actually makes the audience engage with the ideas.

Then there are artists whose work stands out because it does not fit in any

recognisable box of definition and leans on ideas or visuals that also ignore our expectations, but the weirdness is hard to engage with because it lacks the recognisable or non-abstract elements needed for an audience to connect to.

Space Babies is very, very literal, very, very weird, and is very easy to engage with — at first. But the more it commits to its weirdness, the more it feels like a tone-setter for Ncuti Gatwa's era rather than a story in its own right for the Fifteenth Doctor or his companion.

There is no pre-titles scene, which feels like a missed trick when this episode has a monster that's perfectly suited to a jump scare cliffhanger, and the actual opening scene doesn't work at first because of a mismatch in tone with the rest of the episode. Murray Gold is left to get the magic of the moment across as Ruby

Sunday enters the TARDIS, when the rest of the runtime instead relies on the Fifteenth Doctor's charismatic line delivery and his chemistry with Ruby to tell the story, no matter how naff the dialogue is.

Once the main characters do get chatting, we see how physical and almost overexcitable (which is very notable later on) Gatwa's performance is. When Mille Gibson does similar throughout *Space Babies*, it's hard to tell if that's instilled in her character or if she is bouncing off her co-star.

She does get to briefly play Ruby in a more diverse way before the main plot begins, as she steps on a pre-historic butterfly in a fun moment used in many trailers. How that scene is concluded is nonsensical, and it's the first of many moments where the story relies on Gatwa's charisma to move it along and thankfully this is the least convincing instance since it is also the least important one.

The plot rapidly accelerates once the TARDIS makes it to the spaceship populated by space babies, with the editing pace having already got up to speed before that, and there's plenty of exploring and then running down corridors. A physical performance works for such staples of the show, but less so in still moments where the Doctor's hands instinctively go to cover his companion's eyes or mouth rather than his own.

Outside of the lore-dumping dialogue, the Doctor gets his key character-explaining moment when he runs away from a monster and wonders why. It's basically setting a rule saying "my character should always be enthusiastic and driven by curiosity, and never fear". Having a scene that depicts



that understanding to the audience this early, rather than waiting for the actual showdown between Doctor and monster, works to the episode's favour and again relays that this is all about the tone we should always be expecting now from the Doctor, and therefore the show.

Once the babies themselves are integrated into the plot, it's harder to judge the effectiveness of the character work because they are, of course, babies. No matter how good the CGI for the lip syncing is, how do you judge the performances of a bunch of talking space babies? Obviously it's wonderful to see the moments where the Doctor and Ruby are being lovingly warm to them, and Gatwa really pulls off not only talking to them as if they're only two years old but also conversating with them as if they're equals. But each time the babies reply, you do have to put your disbelief to one side because it is exceptionally weird.

The science-fiction element of this is political commentary more than anything else, and hits home for American and British audiences in different ways, but rather than examine the science behind the weirdness, there instead is the Doctor delivering a lot of generalised comments about time and space... and, er, not paying taxes. The way he jovially treats a baby farm as a totally, totally normal thing, while

it is a very alien and weird concept to the audience, helps deliver an idea that is so distant from our social expectations.

He also gets Ruby to call her mum from the far future, which like a lot of this episode is reminiscent of the Ninth Doctor's second episode, *The End of the World*. Just in an inferior way.



However, where this episode does deliver, thanks to its weirdness, is being unnerving and scary. The monster of the week is a brilliantly horrific design and most of its screen time consists of rapid cuts (well done to the editors, once again); once you've got over the slightly unsettling/uncanny valley experience of talking babies, you've then got to watch them scream and cry and the audio mixing of multiple crying children is as uncomfortable to hear in a sci-fi television show as it is at a nursery or on the news.

Once it comes to actually facing the monster of the week, which has a funny but ill-defined scientific premise, the (not villainous) babies' motivations suddenly change and they get as many moments of character-defining bravery as Ruby. Which isn't a balance you probably want with a new companion who is still establishing themselves to the audience and to some degree the Doctor.

The one other adult in the cast is Jocelyn Sancerre, who is played with warmth by Golda Rosheuvel and brings some comedy

in too. She sets up the next heroic moment which is all for the Doctor and leads to another funny but ill-defined scientific premise that concludes the TARDIS crew's time on Baby Station Beta.

Space Babies ends with a heart-to-heart in the TARDIS, reminding the audience of the importance of the events of *The Church on Ruby Road* and that the Doctor's choice of companion goes beyond their brilliant chemistry, then returns Ruby to her own time by crashing into her mum's kitchen.

The similarities with Russell T Davies' first time at the helm of the show are made clear with one of the Doctor's closing lines: "Tell your mum not to slap me!"

As in his first full episode, Gatwa puts in a performance that makes him immediately recognisable and lovable as the Doctor. Gibson is not quite given enough to do, but with two baby-themed episodes in a row, maybe there was a risk of repetition if she led more of the action, and the story does leave you wanting to see more of this TARDIS crew but in a less weird setting. But with the tone now set, it looks like *The Devil's Chord* continues this era's rather unusual approach to *Doctor Who*...



Reviewed: The Devil's Chord

Rick Lundeen



I'm actually thankful circumstances brought me to review this episode of *Doctor Who* Series 14. When I first saw it, it was much later in the evening, and right after *Space Babies*, which annoyed me greatly. So those circumstances might have had me in a less than receptive mood. The meta dance at the end didn't help either. So starting fresh...

The cold open was strong, ominous, and introduced the Maestro, a larger than life god from one of the pantheons. A good start, especially as they played into the opening credits.

Ruby suggests going to see the Beatles,

and while we all agree that the Beatles are THE BEATLES, I call nonsense on the Doctor being so giddy about seeing them. He can admire and respect them, of course, but he's a bit OTT regarding them. Seeing everything he's seen...? Ruby conveys all the giddiness needed, as a 19 year old girl.

Finagling their way into EMI, we come to the first logistical issue.

Yes, all the music is dull. Bad. Everyone's pretty much disgusted with it: John, Paul, everybody — and this has been going on for 35 years? Why do recording studios, orchestras, bands, dancers even exist at all? The last gasp would have come and gone

well before 35 years and millions of production costs. Let's face it, if everyone's disgusted by music, they're certainly not going to be buying it for over three decades. Seems like a very long and winding and unlikely road just to stretch things to get to the Beatles for a *Doctor Who* episode.

And we get our recurring guest star, and one of the linchpins of the "there's something bigger going on here": the cafeteria lady cameo.

Onto the roof... it's nice to hear the Doctor talking about Totter's Lane and Susan, but then, we get another strange declaration from the Doctor regarding the Time Lords. An indication that when the Time Lords died, the event spread out across time and space — so he has no idea if Susan or any of the rest are alive. I admit to being very lost by this strange new announcement. Was there a *third* time the Time Lords all died? Because we, and the Doctor, now know that they didn't die at the end of the Time War. And when the crazy-nut Master allegedly killed them, it certainly looked like he just fire bombed the planet, from which they'd survive to regenerate again anyway, probably. If they're not Cybermen. If there were some new destructive event that wiped them out over time and space, it's new to me. The Flux only did just so much damage, that wasn't it. So, was that false information, or...? Frankly, that confused me.

Onto the confrontations themselves. The Doctor has Ruby play a miserably sad song, presumably to attract the villain, but when the Maestro emerges, the Doctor freaks,

scurries, and hides. He's making a habit of that. He does strike back nicely with the sonic remote (it's definitely not a screwdriver), but realises he's in way over his head and cries a bit. He confesses his soul was torn in half by the bi-generation and he can't go through that again. So, the bi-generation wasn't as fun and glorious as we were made to believe...

The Doctor and Ruby pull a Fourth Doctor and Sarah in *Pyramids of Mars* by going back to present day to see what would happen without music, and as usual, devastation. Honestly, there being no good music anymore as the cause of more wars that destroy the planet? Bit of a reach. I mean, music is great, but humanity never needed musical excuses to get into wars.

The dark stage exposition works well regarding the whys and wherefores of the Maestro's presence, although I'm guessing that the Maestro's only a child of the Toymaker in a symbolic way. Usually with various god pantheons, it seems like everyone's related somehow, even tangentially; otherwise, it might seem like an unlikely coincidence that the Toymaker's kid shows up so soon after he did.

Note though, that it was then the Maestro mentioned "The Oldest One", which one might assume is a different being from "He Who Waits" who's mentioned later.

Onto the final battle. Okay, the Doctor's figured out that the right set of chords can banish the Maestro. He does tell a bald face lie about never calling himself a genius. Come on Russell, how many other incarnations have called themselves that or something close? It's bizarre little false comments like these that set off my "something's not right" sense. But I digress.



Piano vs fiddle, and the Doctor has the upper hand until he flubs it, and everything looks doomed until Lennon and McCartney save the day on the piano. Fair enough. That all worked fine.

But seriously, Russell, you've got:

- Your Disney budget
- An episode with the Beatles in it
- A planned music battle
- And music *has* to save the day...

Why on earth couldn't you buy the rights to some tunes that sound like they *could* save humanity? Yes, I know Beatles music is expensive, but you already bought the rights to some Bowie for the trailers. Having a Beatles episode with nothing but bland, public domain music is a bit of a disappointment. Russell can hang with great *writers* like Dickens, Shakespeare, and Christie in stories — but music? It's a shame, because better music would have really helped to sell the confrontation.

Finally, the meta ending dance. I think this was just — plain and simple — a bad choice. Once again, if good and proper music has now come back into the world and things are quickly becoming joyous and electric... you're *already* at a recording studio, chock full of musicians, instruments, equipment, and very likely dancers anyway! The Doctor could easily have taken advantage of the excitement, jumped on stage and belted out a fun song

on the spot. Absolutely did not have to go meta. And the fact that Russell made that choice is, again, odd. And that twist song was annoying and underwhelming. They could have turned me around with a good song, but eh. I think Russell said he wrote or co-wrote that song. He should stick to writing dialogue, and Murray Gold should have told him it was rubbish. Let Murray write the song himself.

The Doctor and Ruby could've had a fun jam session with everybody, including *The Beatles* and said their goodbyes. And then sure, have a tiny bit of meta fun with the street lines. That would have been lovely.

So in the end, I applaud the performances of Ncuti Gatwa, Jinx Monsoon, and Millie Gibson who showed a bit more range this time out. I thought the concept was pretty solid as well.

But I thought the Beatles were misused, lamentably so, and the music itself was underwhelming and a wasted opportunity.

I initially gave this story a 1 out of 5 for reasons I mentioned at the start, but fair's fair. Upon reassessment, I'll go 2.5 out of 5. With better music and better choices, this could have been a 5.

Now please, by all means — let's go *Boom*.



Reviewed: Boom

Simon Danes



Steven Moffat's one of the best of the writers for 21st Century *Who* and he's at his best when he's not having to spread himself too thinly. Inevitably, writing eight or nine scripts a year when you're the showrunner (and overseeing *Sherlock* at the same time) means you're less likely to be able to produce another *Blink* or another *The Empty Child*. It just can't be done; you can't expect people to have brilliant and original ideas every time a deadline looms for yet another script. Good writers do occasionally pen the odd turkey; after all, it was Robert Holmes who wrote *The Krotons*.

Despite the pressure he was under, though, Moffat wrote some absolute beltors for Matt Smith and Peter Capaldi. Perhaps not quite as good as his solo

episodes during RTD's first tenure. For what it's worth, I think the vibe for *Boom* was pretty similar to a standard quality Moff script for Matt Smith: not quite brilliant, but very good nonetheless. (He wrote it like a Smith/Amy episode, too: you could easily imagine Matt Smith and Karen Gillan delivering the dialogue he gave to Ncuti Gatwa and Millie Gibson here. The Doctor's lines sounded particularly Smithian.)

I suppose one could grumble and say it was a bit Moffat by numbers. Polite and softly spoken sinister robots, the Church of the future morphing into the army (great idea), futuristic ambulances going haywire and harming rather than healing. Actually, none of that bothered me. Moffat's greatest hits

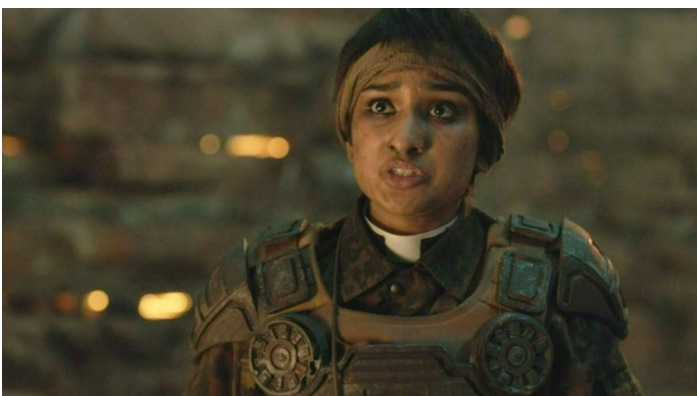
are still great and we liked them last time, so it's good to give them a replay. Was it just me, or were there echoes of Classic *Who* here and there, too? The ambulance shooting wires at people reminded me of Styre's robot, and the ambulances appearing en masse at the rim of the quarry was reminiscent of the shot of the Daleks trundling up to the edge of the cliff to join the Master on the planet of the Ogrons. No? Okay, just me then.

The guest cast was splendid, too. When I first watched it, a great and mighty thought did strike me: Gosh! (opined I). Gosh! That actor playing Mundy Flynn is really really good, isn't she? Genuinely impressive work by a talented actor; she really lifts that character off the page and gives a multi-layered performance. A totally believable human being. Really impressive.

I hadn't realised at the time that it was Varada Sethu. Yes, I know I should have done. You have to forgive me for the infirmities of age. I knew a new companion had been cast but my ancient brain had not made the connection. If she's anything like as good as the new female lead as she was as the Reverend Ms Flynn, we're in for a treat. Presumably she'll be playing a different character, but RTD's lips are sealed, so we'll have to wait and see. But it's a great piece of casting and I think she's going to be fab.

While we're on casting... I confess I'm still not quite wholly convinced by Ncuti's Doctor. I'd like to be. He's a superb actor and he's certainly got the talent needed. (My wife thinks he's great.) Perhaps we're in the same territory as we were with Pertwee and Capaldi in their early stories: good potential, but not quite there yet. A friend of mine at Bedford Doc Soc – we meet every month in the pub to chat and put the world to rights – commented that she thinks it takes a Doctor until his third year to fully find the role. There's something in that, even if it's not a universal rule. Also, the first two scripts for the Fifteenth Doctor concentrated on his fun side – we haven't yet seen the character's steel or his moral outrage. I've no doubt Ncuti Gatwa can deliver the goods but clearly he has to work with the material he's given. We certainly saw his more serious side this week but can we have a bit more of the moral crusader, please? Millie Gibson is fine and I don't like to criticise but so far, she's a bit generic. And we've also had the 'who is she really?' question about the companion before, and I can't really work up much enthusiasm for the resolution. So long as she doesn't turn out to be the Doctor or the original Timeless Child, which would be really dull.

Was there a swipe at the euthanasia debate in the episode? Hmm. Maybe. I taught Religious Studies for 20 years, so I had to take successive generations of students through the arguments pro and con for their GCSE in RS. This isn't the place to rehash those arguments – though they're topical, as the issue's being discussed by politicians at the moment (though they've got something else on their minds right now). Just to say that one



of the cons of allowing euthanasia is that the right to die can slip into the duty to die, and then possibly even to giving other people the right to decide when a life should end. It wouldn't be nice if some bit of AI in hospitals 10 years from now coolly weighs up a patient's condition and decides to do the kindest thing. Especially because people are expensive and the budget for keeping someone alive could best be spent elsewhere.



I'm not really sure, either, that *Doctor Who* (or any other drama) is the place to air writers' views on religion or ethics. Classic *Who* was silent about the Doctor's religious views; it looks as though the cancellation of (the excellent) *The Masters of Luxor* was because the themes were too religious and because it ascribed theism to the Doctor's race. It used to be the case in the UK that it was generally considered to be slightly bad manners to talk about religion or politics, for fear of giving offence. *Doctor Who* used to have a similar reticence, except for the Buddhist Doctor in *Planet of the Spiders*, of course. The Doctor in current *Who* is explicitly non-religious, though different writers seem to have different emphases: curiously, Jodie Whittaker's Doctor was the most sympathetic to Christianity, while David

Tennant's dismissed the resurrection as unhistorical.

I'm a bit uneasy with all this. Steven Moffat's writing doesn't present the Doctor as actively hostile and his portrayal of religious characters is always sympathetic; he handled the papacy sensitively in the Capaldi stories. I'm not terribly comfortable, though, with Ncuti's saying that faith stops people from thinking for themselves (it can do, but it doesn't necessarily do so). It's not confined to the left, but there can be a knee-jerk bias against Christianity in particular, and an assumption that theism is simply nonsense. I also wonder how many Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh viewers feel about the Doctor's new found atheism. I expect it makes them wince, and I expect it makes some rather unhappy. Wouldn't it be best to follow the wiser silence of the classic series, and just avoid the issue altogether?

And the episode closes with the final line from Philip Larkin's *An Arundel Tomb*: 'What will survive of us is love.' A lovely poem and a good point to finish on, though I'm going to be picky and note that: a) it was slightly misquoted, and b) I doubt the Doctor would have been friends with Larkin. Larkin had his good side, as every human being does, but his staunchly-held views on race were closer to the contemporary National Front than to anything in mainstream politics and I suspect the Doctor would have found him repellent. Always a quandary, this: what should you do when genuinely great work is produced by someone who's not very nice? Avoid it, or ignore the creator and enjoy the creation...?

Reviewed: 73 Yards

Rick Lundeen



For 60 years now, as fans of *Doctor Who*, we've encountered bizarre phenomena having to do with time travel. Quite often, it makes no sense if you put the microscope to it. The unexplainable phenomenon has even been given an unofficial term: "timey-wimey", because for us, time travel is not possible, and some bits are over our heads. Indeed, those bits are often over the heads of most characters in the episodes themselves.

But usually, we content ourselves with it being an entertaining story that thrills us, scares us, or makes us laugh. We accept the timey-wimey and just enjoy it, because it's *Doctor Who*.

Well, I'm here to tell you, I enjoyed *73 Yards*. Yes, there are questions I have that

will perhaps never be answered, as it deals with the mechanics or rules of the supernatural, because you might very well say...

It's "witchy-itchy".

You may as well log this *Doctor Who* term right over there with timey-wimey. Makes just as much sense.

Now, admitting that — just like time travel — I don't know everything about witchcraft, spells, and fairy circles, this was one creepy story. And it was *ambitious!* Doing a Doctor-lite story this early on in the Fifteenth Doctor's run was risky, but unlike nonsensical songs, and meta dance numbers, I actually love that Russell T Davies went this route. It reminded me a bit of *Turn Left*, only with Ruby being the

abandoned companion. Credit where credit is due though — I've been very public about my disdain for Ruby Sunday since she arrived, but Millie Gibson did a good job here. I think she may have earned her stripes with this one, which is kooky seeing as this was the first one she actually filmed.

I have no idea why the Doctor is so unbelievably excited about arriving in Wales — can't be because of the sleepy, local pubs run by jerks who terrorise young, vulnerable blondes in the dark of night. I did like how respectful and tender the Doctor was regarding the sanctity of the fairy circle both at the start and finish of the episode. It was touching and lovely. That's Ncuti Gatwa's sweet spot there, and he managed it without tears.

Going into this, approaching the halfway point of this season, I thought the old woman in the distance would once again be Susan Twist, this time playing "The Hiker", and that we'd get a big, mid-season reveal. Nope. She was just an actual hiker,

and the charade plays on. I'm shifting away from this being a simulation, and leaning more towards this season being a manipulated and observed timeline by The One Who Waits. Or if it is the three gods of Ragnarok, you've got Flood, Twist, and...? But that's another discussion. I'm sure the exact nature of how that all works will be about as muddy as "Bad Wolf" at the end of the first Series 1.

But the wildest, creepiest element in all the story is The Freak-Out. Anyone who encounters the old woman in the distance simply freaks out — even Ruby's mother and Kate Lethbridge-Stewart (Jemma Redgrave). At first, I wondered what the old woman could have said about Ruby to freak people out. But after the interaction with her mom, what possible thing could the woman have said to make her actively and angrily turn against her own daughter? Albeit a foster daughter who she dearly loved?

It eventually seemed more likely she was



not clearly communicating with words, but with some sound that screwed with people's higher brain functions, causing terror in the subject triggering a fight or flight reaction when going anywhere near either old woman or Ruby. Regarding the "witchy-itchy" nature of the situation, that's what made the most sense to me.

The time shifts through Ruby's life, rocky and disruptive as it was with her dragging around the old woman... I initially wondered if her taking down the politician in '46 was the reason for the old woman in the first place. But no, I think the primary goal was old Ruby running out the life cycle to go back and influence young Ruby to



Mad Jack. Was his rise, his existence (?), the supernatural equivalent to the Bootstrap Paradox? He clearly was connected to the fairy circle, but was he put in play in the timeline because the Doctor broke the circle? Was the Doctor the one who originally stopped him in the normal timeline, but his disappearance altered things, forcing Ruby to take a hand and play things out, merely because she remembered the Doctor mentioning him? And the breaking of the fairy circle: did the Doctor really disappear, or was he just held back as his actions caused a new supernatural timeline to branch off? A new timeline that Ruby fixed, even though it took her 65 years to do it?

Witchy-itchy.

prevent the Doctor from stepping on the fairy circle. Stopping the politician using the old woman as a weapon and thus saving the world from nuclear devastation was a beneficial by-product — a side part of the overall plan. Ooof! This was a heavy episode.

I enjoyed *73 Yards*, probably even more than *Boom* last week. I admire a bold story and this was definitely that, as well as a fun ride. I'll be curious to see what mercurial fandom will say. Russell said he felt this was the best thing he'd ever written. I wouldn't go that far, as *Turn Left* and *Midnight* still top it, but I do think it was better than the vast majority of his previous stuff.

Reviewed: Dot and Bubble

Frank Danes (and Claire, Helen, and Joseph)



We all know what fans think of *Doctor Who*, but what about the viewers who like it but wouldn't class themselves as fans? What did they make of *Dot and Bubble*?

To make a change from my banging on about my ideas, this review is by three people who like *Doctor Who* very much but wouldn't call themselves "Whovians". Let's meet them.

- Claire started watching *Doctor Who* with *The TV Movie* in 1996 and has caught up with most of the classic series on VHS and DVD. She has watched all of Nu *Who* but gave up on Jodie's episodes after *The Tsuranga Conundrum*.
- Helen is in her early twenties and has watched all of Nu *Who*. She also bailed out on some of Jodie's episodes and rejoined the show for *The Power of the Doctor*. She has seen some of the

original series.

- Joseph is twenty and has watched most of Nu *Who* and several episodes of the original series.

We discussed the episode straight after it was broadcast. I took notes and nudged the discussion a little but this is what Claire, Helen, and Joseph made of it.

Be warned... Some strong opinions follow and you might not agree with them...

Helen: I heard that this episode was originally pitched as a Matt Smith episode. I can't believe that it was years in the making! It should have been better. The satire is ridiculously obvious, on the level of "you young people can't get off your phones or live without TikTok". It's crass satire. It also seemed to be written by someone who didn't like teenagers. "They only do two hours' work a day and then they party" – that's a patronising view of teenagers by someone in his sixties.

Claire: You're right; it's "you young people can't do without your technological devices" – it was very patronising. I thought this was a very boring episode. It took far too long to get started.

Joseph: I thought the video call when the slug came into view was hysterical. It was supposed to be scary but was just funny.

Claire: That's right. There was no scare factor with the monsters; they were as ludicrous as the bubble wrap monsters you used to get in the original series. They were funny, not terrifying, and I imagine they were meant to be terrifying.

Joseph: The writing wasn't good. The human beings behave like ludicrous parodies of human beings. And September looked as though he'd stepped straight out of some high school drama. Wow! He reads books! And loves history! He's so deep! It's like Angel reading Nietzsche [in the second season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*].

Helen: He wasn't like other guys! He reads books! Wow! I thought he was going to turn out to be evil or a hologram or something, but no...

Claire: I quite liked that the Doctor was unable to save them at the end. It's very rare that characters actually *choose* not to be saved. That was interesting.

Helen: And that gave Ncuti an acting moment: his rage and despair.

Joseph: Yes, laughing then angry. I think that's the first time we've seen the Doctor unable to save people.

Claire: I'm not at all sure about the mention of "voodoo" at the end [as the reason why the young folk won't go into

the TARDIS]. The Doctor is the only black character, so did they not want to go with him because he was black? Or was it because he was an adult?

Frank: I thought it was a class thing; they were all rich and he was scruffy – but you're probably right, it was about racism.

Claire: I thought Ruby was really good in the previous episode [*73 Yards*] but she had far too much to do in *Dot and Bubble*. Why isn't the Doctor doing more? Ruby and the Doctor are now an equal partnership with equal screen time but why on earth is that? And again, as with Jodie, we have a Doctor who is not socially awkward or out of step with other characters. Ruby and the Doctor know each other really well, too well, after just a few episodes; they're always jumping up and down and hugging. There is no sense of a developing relationship. Most of the companions find the Doctor difficult or challenging, but we've lost that. Even Martha, who I didn't like much, had a more interesting relationship with the Doctor than Ruby...

Helen: Yes. How can we be invested in the Doctor or Ruby when they lack substance as characters and when we never see them? The Doctor doesn't feel like a major character any more. He is always peppy, grinny, cheery.

Joseph: That's three episodes in a row when the Doctor hasn't been able to walk around and do things. He was stuck on a mine [in *Boom*], then absent for most of *73 Yards* ...

Claire: The show is actually called *Doctor Who* so... where is he? This episode didn't feel like *Doctor Who*. It stayed with that boring girl [Lindy] all the way through. The



Doctor doesn't *do* anything any more.

Helen: That's right. *Dot and Bubble* was very like *Blink* in structure – stay with the point of view of a new character, keep the Doctor at a distance. But the difference is that *Blink* was good and this was dreadful.

Joseph: It's just Russell T Davies stitching together a bunch of wacky ideas. They should have stuck with the Doctor and Ruby, and told it as a traditional *Doctor Who* story, especially as they haven't really established Ncuti as the Doctor yet.

Claire: Yes, it's as though Davies started with lots of pretty pictures – you often get this with Davies – but it doesn't all add up. When you try to piece it together as a story, the story falls apart. Davies didn't, again, take the opportunity of looking at the society. Why were the parents so happy to send their children to Finetime? It was just like *Space Babies*, when we had no real idea of why the parents from the planet dumped their children on a space station. Davies doesn't do context. We should care about a society that behaves this badly but we're not given a chance to because there is no context, no depth, and no explanation.

Joseph: And it was actually so ugly to look at on screen, when Lindy was in her bubble. There was no careful explanation or consolidation of the fictional world; just a handful of cool looking images and ideas... It's as though Davies started by saying, "this would look nice on screen", and then tried and failed to build a story around the visuals. It felt as if more screen time was needed to establish the world of Finetime, rather than just showing us endless scenes of Lindy in her bubble. Was the story thought through properly? Why did the slugs eat people in alphabetical order?

Helen: I thought it was hilarious that Lindy couldn't walk without her phone but then suddenly she was able to. It was way too sudden. She must have been able to walk on Homeworld before she arrived at Finetime so why couldn't she walk any more? And the characters all came to terms very quickly with everyone being dead.

Claire: No one forgets how to walk! It was just not credible! Yes, why did the dot create the slugs? Why didn't it just kill people anyway? Were the slugs supposed to be



a computer bug? And I'm happy to believe that Ncuti is a good actor – I haven't seen him in anything else – but he's not being given anything to do.

Helen: He was good at the end, with his disbelieving laughter.

Claire: You no longer have a sense of a physical journey this season; that the Doctor and Ruby get into the TARDIS and travel from place to place. There are no scenes in the TARDIS any more.

Frank: And you need those to get the character interaction.

Claire: What's the thing with Susan Twist? I barely noticed her. Wasn't she the woman Ruby met on the path in *73 Yards*? They're trying to repeat the repeated image, from one episode to another, of the Eye Patch Lady or Missy, but both those worked because they were so visually distinctive. You can't pick up clearly on this Susan Twist thing.

Joseph: Was the ending, with the young people going on a boat and being doomed, meant to be a metaphor for this generation of young people in our world being doomed? Because that's really lame.

Helen: I think the whole episode made fun

of young people, people my age. It p*ssed me off. I think it was saying, you young people are hopeless, with your TikTok, fashion, vintage fashion, and mental health problems. It was teenage girls' culture being mocked by a man in his sixties. It was mean spirited and unnecessary and straight out of *Black Mirror*, which I stopped watching because it had the same attitude to young people. Then Davies made the teenagers racist at the end, which made it okay to send them to their doom. It was like watching a satire by someone who'd never met a teenager, or who hates young people.

Final thoughts?

Claire: There is no consistency in this season.

Helen: Yes, this week it was trying to be *Black Mirror*. Next week it's going to be *Bridgerton*

Joseph: With owl people.

Helen: With owl people. They are picking and choosing different genres week by week: last week it was a spooky Wales story...

Frank: I think that's true. It's like an anthology show now, not *Doctor Who*.



Claire: It's straight out of the Chibnall playbook, referencing other shows. He referenced *Call the Midwife*...

Marks out of ten?

Claire: 2/10. We were laughing *at* the peril. The slugs weren't scary monsters; they were just ridiculous. And I'd give *73 Yards* 8/10, though I want to have some explanations for the plot, otherwise that's just a provisional score for it... And why did the Doctor think they'd all die in the forest when he'd tried to sell them the river as a desirable place to escape to?

Joseph: 3/10. It did at least feel like a story. And two of those marks are for the slugs eating the people on the video call, which was just funny...

Claire: Oh, that was ridiculous! With his legs sticking out!

Helen: I was willing to like it but it was a boring episode. I just don't know who the show is for now. Is it for the fans? But Frank didn't like it and he's a fan. Is it for

adults? I don't think so. Is it for young people? Well, they cast an actor who's famous with people my age as the Doctor. Some of my friends never watch *Doctor Who* but watch it now because that guy who was Eric in *Sex Education* is the Doctor. So they get young people on board and then take the p*ss out of them. And you learnt nothing about the Doctor or Ruby in this episode.

Claire: Each episode this season could have been the first, establishing episode of a season. There's no consistency in the season at all... of genre or quality. I think I'm only watching it out of loyalty to the brand; it's *Doctor Who* and I like *Doctor Who* and want it to be good. But it isn't good. If I'd tuned in to *73 Yards* or *Boom* as a casual viewer, I'd have stayed with it and then wanted to watch the next episode. But if I'd started with *Dot and Bubble* I wouldn't have made it to the end of the episode, and the same goes for the rest of the episodes this season.



Reviewed: Rogue

Thomas Spychalski



Doctor Who has always been a progressive and trailblazing series both in front of and behind the camera.

From original producer Verity Lambert being integral to the series initial creation in an era when women were hardly given such power in television all the way up to the current era where the Doctor is both coloured and gay, it has never backed away from picking up a mantle for a good cause, much like the programme's namesake.

There are episodes that highlight this kind of tone across its history like the environmental message of *The Green Death* or the modern slavery tones reached in *Planet of the Ood*.

Rogue definitely will become one of those polarising episodes that reflect what is being discussed in current culture and politics despite possibly angering parts of the viewing public.

In other circles, it will most likely be praised as another example of *Doctor Who* displaying the savvy and the courage to keep up with the times.

The main factor that really comes in to steal the show is currently a man just as much a mystery as the Doctor once was to us as well as bring another person in the *Who* universe who refuses to have a surname, wishing to be known simply as Rogue.

Rogue is an interesting fellow, and I, along with many others, felt a very strong Captain Jack Harkness vibe from him and I think that might have been the idea, a kind of: "What if we did the introduction of Captain Jack Harkness over again but instead of falling for Rose Tyler and dancing on a spaceship, he falls for the Doctor and they bravely dance together in a ballroom?"

The result is a very good story where the

Doctor loses a love yet again in a heart-breaking manner — let's be honest, even if you hated the idea of the Doctor having a love life since *The TV Movie*, you've got to admit it is a love life filled with tragedy and loss.

As far as powerful scenes go, you couldn't do much better than the Doctor and Rogue dancing together in 1813 in a way that not only breaks the conventions of that time period but also thumbs its nose at those in today's society that still have views possibly stuck in the 19th Century.



As an episode, *Rogue* also keeps up the tradition of latter day *Doctor Who* adventures riffing on the less serious aspects of human society, this time with the art of cosplay, represented in the form of the shape shifting Chuldur, who travel about looking for new roles to play as they use living beings like costumes.

Looking and sounding like birds, the aliens were interesting enough although I wish we explored more of the why of their gruesome past time — but as the real thrust of the script seems to be the relationship between the Doctor and Rogue, I'm not surprised their motivation took a back seat.

Despite this, the Chuldur were still well

rounded enough to be the main threat of the story, especially when they showed up in numbers, upping the ante nicely.

Another character of interest to fans is the Duchess of Pemberton, played by Indra Varma, who previously played Suzie Costello in the first series of *Torchwood* on television as well as some later audio plays.

Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) continues to show herself to be a very worthy companion to our wandering Time Lord, being the right mix of intelligence and caring, although I will admit to feeling a sort of fatigue for how most of the 'new' series of *Doctor Who* companions have had some sort of a meta-crisis, been an impossible girl, can conjure snow, or are made to be otherwise very special and unique people in the universe.

I'll wait it out over the next two weeks before really coming down too hard on that aspect of this series, as it may all have a brilliant and relevant resolution; I miss the days of the average companion who did not have a destiny to save all of creation.

Being someone who watched this in America on Disney+, I wish they had left the small tribute to William Russell on the streaming services version of *Rogue*, as it would've been nice for those in the know and a great nod to one of the original artists to get *Doctor Who* off the ground.

All in all, *Rogue*, although not the best this new series has had to offer so far by any means (that one goes to the Doctor-lite episode *73 Yards* unless the next two episodes top it), this week's adventure was still good *Doctor Who* with an intriguing new character and a powerful statement.

The show is still *Doctor Who* and very much still worth watching.

Reviewed: The Legend of Ruby Sunday

Peter Shaw



Back in 2005, I had a frightening dream. In this nightmare, *Doctor Who* was about to be back on television. I know, terrifying. Not because I was worried that it would be rubbish. Not that I had concerns that it wouldn't be the show I loved. No. I was traumatised because I didn't have a VHS tape to record it on.

Of course, in reality, I had plenty of tapes. I would have recorded over *Star Cops* if needed (that's a joke by the way, don't patronise me). But in this dream, they had all mysteriously disappeared (just like bricks don't). So I went on a nightmarish hunt around the shops in my home town, Walton-on-Thames.

And in a shop where I once bought a BSB satellite system to watch old episodes of *Doctor Who*, I found a single, dusty, VHS

tape. Which I bought and took home. As *Doctor Who* was about to be on, I took the tape out to set it to record. But on the VHS there was a label: 'The Mary Rose.' Disaster! I couldn't record over The Mary Rose. (I know it doesn't make complete sense, but it made DRAMATIC sense in a very Russell T Davies way.) I stared at the VHS tape in horror as the *Doctor Who* end titles sting and music told me I'd have to wait a whole week to find out how I got out of it...

First thing to note: this is an entirely true story (apart from the bit I added at the end about the credits). I woke up and recounted the dream to my wife who, nearly 20 years later, still tells it as an anecdote to convince people how sad a *Doctor Who* fan I am/was. They've usually worked it out already because of the

Monoid eye tattoo on my forehead.

Second thing to note is that the dream is entirely relevant to this review. It is. No, it is. I'm telling you: *it is*. Because back in 2005 if you missed *Doctor Who* on TV, you had to have recorded it on your video cassette recorder. And, if there was a power cut, if your mum unplugged the VCR to do the Hoovering or you'd entered the VideoPlus+ code incorrectly and you'd taped *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* instead, then you would have missed *Doctor Who*! So the only safe thing was to sit in front of the TV and press record when it came on (or a few seconds before). Which meant *Doctor Who's* audience was the people who watched it on Saturday night. And a few brave souls who risked the VHS Russian Roulette. Or who had friends who watched *Doctor Who* who also recorded it (I had neither: see the earlier tattoo reference). This was the case until iPlayer arrived on 25th December 2007, and, gradually, our 'viewing habits' changed. Until then, VHS tapes were precious things, as Ruby Sunday and her adopted family will testify.

Now, practically no one watches *Doctor Who* on TV when it's on TV. I don't. And that's a shame, particularly because of episodes like *The Legend of Ruby Sunday*.



Now I'm not suggesting it was 'better in the good old days' as everything has gone 'woke' and 'snowflake'. I'm not writing Richard Molesworth's column in *Infinity* magazine. I am saying it has good things and bad things. Sometimes, it means I can stay up on Friday and watch it when it drops at midnight (and fall asleep three minutes before the end like I did with *Rogue*). Other times, we can plan when to watch it around kids parties, kids bedtime, and kids screen time (I don't have a life to make me miss it). But, then, spoilers leak everywhere if you don't watch at midnight. And this episode, while it had much more to recommend it, was all about the big reveal. So spoiling that was huge.

It's a very RTD *Who* episode (and much less of an RTD2 episode). It's Bad Wolf, Daleks in the void, Yana is the Master, the day the Time Lords returned... It has a mysterious figure rising to power like Harold Saxon, Joshua Naismith, and 'Mad Jack' Roger ap Gwilliam. It's heralded by dreams and too big for the Doctor to face alone. If Ruby doesn't become some sort of powerful God-like entity at the end and save the day, I'll eat my Mary Rose VHS.

As you'll probably have guessed from my reviews of old, I don't do plot summaries. Fortunately, my AI friend, The Vlinx, does:

In *The Legend of Ruby Sunday*, the Doctor and their allies at UNIT team up to investigate a mystery surrounding companion Ruby Sunday's past. They utilize a device called the Time Window to revisit the night Ruby was abandoned as a baby on Christmas Eve.

The investigation takes a dark turn when a mysterious corporation, Triad Technology, becomes involved and unleashes an ancient evil. The episode builds towards a shocking cliffhanger with the return of Sutekh, a

powerful villain from *Doctor Who's* classic era.

While the Doctor grapples with this new threat, they also struggle with unresolved feelings about their granddaughter Susan, who appears to be somehow connected to the events.

Thanks Vlinx. Thlinx. Not sure about the US spelling of utilise, but there you are.

Now there was much I really enjoyed about the episode. It felt super exciting. I loved the big reveal and callbacks to *Pyramids of Mars*. Shame Robert Holmes wasn't credited but that was his ideas and dialogue that terrified kids across the world nearly 50 years later, not Lewis Greifer's. But I suspect that was some kind of contractual thing. But we who know, know. Thanks Bob. Thob.

There were a few things that confused me. Why was it never explained what the 'software' Susan Triad was releasing worldwide? If I was the Doctor (which I am not, yet) the question I would ask is, "What is the 'software' Susan Triad was releasing worldwide?" I mean, if you suspected an evil scheme or a trap, you'd ask, right? And why did Ruby immediately think that Triad was the Doctor's granddaughter? There's not much of a family resemblance and he's older than her. She could have worked out the timey-wimey stuff but not the appearance thing.

And the name, Susan. It's hardly Romanadvoratrelundar. Hey, The Vlinx, how many people in the world are called Susan?

It's impossible to determine the exact number of people in the world named Susan.

Here's why:

No central name registry: There's no single source that tracks every name globally.

Name variations: Susan might have variations in different languages and cultures.

Thanks for nothing, The Vlinx. Tnlinx. But I know the answer: loads. Loads and loads of Susans. It's like someone looking for their lost father, Terry. And someone in the pub saying: "My uncle's called Terry! It could be him!"

I suppose it's because of the mystery of Susan Triad and her strange rise to prominence while her likeness is projected throughout space and time that links them. Yes, there is that. Or Ruby's been looking at X. Naughty Ruby.

And the anagrams. What is it with super-advanced beings revealing themselves in anagrams, acronyms, and acrostics? However, it did give us one of the most absurdly un-dramatic reveal lines in *Doctor Who* history: "It was the wrong anagram." That's not exactly t-shirt material, is it? I wonder how many attempts the ever-brilliant Ncuti Gatwa took to nail the delivery.

But, unlike my VHS dream, the real proof of this episode will be in the conclusion next Friday at midnight, Saturday on TV, or Wednesday if you are on a long weekend camping trip to Cornwall where you're about as likely to get a signal as it turning out that Mrs Flood is Susan after all. But on your way to the portaloos, you'll probably overhear a vocal local yokel with a Monoid tattoo on his head saying: "Who'd have thought the Doctor would defeat Sutekh the great Destroyer, Sutekh, the Lord of Death with an old VHS tape containing 'The Mary Rose'!"

Reviewed: Empire of Death

Tyler Harris



So here we are. The dust has settled (if you'll pardon the pun) on *Doctor Who's* 40th/14th/1st series/season, and the internet has been... absolutely normal about it. I think I experienced all seven stages of grieving in the hours following the finale, and I think that's a good thing.

To get the obvious out of the way: no, I did not hate the finale, and this review isn't going to bash it or Russell T Davies. I have issues with it – like I do for almost every single other episode of the show that I have ever seen – but overall, I liked it. And with that in mind, let's start with some of those likes.

Firstly: *Doctor Who* has truly never looked better. And I think I have said that aloud during every episode of this season, but

wow. The CGI for Sutekh and the Time Vortex – just wow. Yes, I do, in a way, wish that Sutekh were still just a fellow in a mask like in *Pyramids of Mars*, but if he had to be a CGI creation, this is as good as it can possibly get, so massive props to the visual effects team for their work here.

While I am going to outline some problems I personally had with the pacing and story a little later, it's also worth repeating (again and again and again) how much Ncuti Gatwa is the Doctor, and how much life he brought to this episode. This is the second time this season where he has moved me to tears without saying a word, and his performance and charm and heart(s) are just astonishing to watch. Similar plaudits to Millie Gibson, who has grown on me a considerable amount over the season, and

of course to Bonnie Langford, Jemma Redgrave, Lenny Rush, Susan Twist, and the (astoundingly villainous) voice of 91-year-old Gabriel Woolf. The performances here blew me away.

Also worth mentioning here that I adored the scene between the Doctor and Kind Woman (played by the amazing Sian Clifford), even if I do think the pacing and placement of it was weird (more on that in a bit). The writing and performances here from Gatwa and Clifford were phenomenal, and the gut-punch reveal that she forgot that her child was dead? Heartbreaking. It was such a quiet and simple scene, but it carried so much weight to it. And to everyone thinking it: no, I don't think she is going to turn out to be Susan, or anyone else "important" for that matter. She was simply here to remind the Doctor – and the audience – of the stakes, and for that, I think this scene was perfect.

Jumping ahead a little, the ending of this episode was handled beautifully. The final 15 minutes of the episode moved me so deeply, and that conversation between Ruby and her birth mother in the café was like a gut-punch – as was the Doctor turning away after Ruby tells him she loves him. Again: the performances! But also: the writing, direction, camera work... All of it. Yes, we know Ruby will be back, but as endings go in isolation, this was pure gold. Russell really knows how to write a compelling family drama, and this was one of his finest efforts on that front.

So what didn't *Empire of Death* do very well? In a word, pacing. Whilst I did appreciate the immediacy of the situation – the entire planet being turned to dust in

the first five minutes of the episode – there was a little bit of a lull after that (for more than a while). I was so anxious to get to the answers and the final showdown, and we spent a good chunk of the episode aboard the Memory TARDIS (so cool, by the way) coming up with a plan. This isn't to say I didn't still love this section, and that I don't appreciate a story taking its time, but this felt a little too slow – especially after how masterfully the previous episode built up to the reveal, and how immediately we hit the ground running here. This balances out as the episode progresses, but it was quite noticeable and jarring on my first watch-through.

But pacing aside, I think it's time to talk about the reveal. Ruby's mother is no one. She is an ordinary woman, who just happened to own the most villainous cloak ever and likes to point at street signs when no one is watching. To be clear: I like the reveal. The Doctor himself (when he looked like Matt Smith) said that he has "never met anybody who wasn't important before," and I like looking at this through that lens. I also don't mind a bit of bait-and-switch – a good mystery should have red herrings, and it shouldn't be obvious from word go.

But.

The idea that every clue this season was put there purely to mess with the audience and throw them off the trail is... disheartening. It felt as though Russell was punishing us for theorising, yet all the while dropping the Trickster's theme here, and Ruby's mother not being on any DNA database in the world there... and then Ruby gets sucked into a pocket dimension/alternate timeline and still retains some

subconscious memories of it later. The list goes on. Reaching the end of this season-long mystery and being told “oh, you actually believed all of those clues we dropped? Well, you shouldn’t have!” is very poor writing, and actively makes me not want to theorise in the future.

Take Mrs. Flood for example. No, she isn’t Clara, or Romana, or River, but why should I stay invested in this mystery now when it could turn out she’s just another massive red herring that won’t pay off? Why should I get invested in the second season and follow whatever mysteries pop up there week-to-week when the reveal at the end is simply “here is all of the information you as the audience didn’t have (because we were purposely hiding the street sign from you) and that’s the answer and you were silly for thinking it would be someone important”?

Again: I don’t hate the reveal that Ruby is “no one” and her mother is normal – that sits fine with me. But it’s the manner in which it was unravelled and revealed that I take big issue with. I am a big murder mystery/thriller fan, and one of the best feelings in the world is piecing together the answer alongside (or sometimes before!) the detective/central character, and then getting a satisfying payoff at the end, whether you were right or wrong. You feel like you’re along for the ride, and part of the story, and that is something Russell missed when he wrote this “you read too much into the clues we fed you” ending. The focus was too much on being meta, and while I am usually a big fan of this (and the themes here, of not putting too much meaning into every little thing), there needed to be a lot more explanation in the script for all of this.

Whilst it may seem as though I hated this episode, or I am never returning to watch *Doctor Who* again, that isn’t the case. I loved this season, and I just think the finale dropped the ball a little. Even my favourite seasons of the show (Series 1 with Christopher Eccleston, and Series 10 with Peter Capaldi and Pearl Mackie) have low points, and every single Russell-penned finale has some kind of contrivance/deus-ex-machina that saves the day and doesn’t sit well with audiences. Didn’t they defeat the Master with the power of prayer? That’s so goofy, but also so... Russell. And I love it.



The online discourse around this episode is too harsh, and I am well aware that my dislikes outweighed my positives, but it really does all come down to one decision in the writing for me. The 40 minutes leading to that reveal, and the 15 following it? Outstanding. The most *Doctor Who* that *Doctor Who* has felt in years. So yes, I may have my hang-ups here and there, but you bet your life I am still full steam ahead towards Steven Moffat’s Christmas Special, and I’ll be firmly planted on the couch the second Series 41/Season 15/Season 2 drops in 2025.

A Closer Look at Lovarzi's Seventh Doctor Sweater (as Seen on TV!)

Philip Bates

The Seventh Doctor era has had a re-evaluation over the last few years, and that's perhaps been added to after Bonnie Langford's return as Mel Bush opposite the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Doctor.

The Seventh Doctor is brilliant. The stories are, on the whole, brilliant too. Sylvester McCoy might feel he wasn't given a proper crack of the whip, but he still has an ever-expanding pool of fans. And we can show off the fact that we love political satire, the darker side of society, and the Kandyman, thanks to Lovarzi and the company's pitch-perfect replica of his jumper.

McCoy reportedly wasn't too keen on his costume, but I'll go right out and say it: I think it's great. I'm not the only one. Gone are the garish, haphazard colours of the Sixth Doctor. There are layers to the Seventh Doctor's look; the tank top isn't subtle, that's for sure, but the Doctor has that exuberance and likes to show off. Yet there are finer details. Nonetheless, the Seventh Doctor sweater is what people think of when recalling this particular incarnation of the Time Lord.

Lovarzi's version, then, is also full of detail. It's precise and beautifully done. It'd take a lot of work to reproduce anything like this at home and the quality wouldn't be as good. The colours, too, are accurate and bizarrely, they work. Of course it's



clashing, but that doesn't matter. It's a piece in the rich fabric of our favourite show, so it's bold and eye-catching and different from anything else. Basically, it's *Doctor Who*. We should be proud of that.

It's the intricacies of the design that you notice immediately. Presented in a carry case, it's too good to take out. Almost. Oh, as if you can own something like this and not parade around the house in it! You may even be tempted to start rrrrrrrrolling certain letters. When you're done, you can pop it back into the case, no problem, ready for its next outing over Christmas, on a trip down to the shops, or just when the mood once more overtakes you.



There were two concerns, however, after taking it out of the case. Firstly, it feels quite heavy. Secondly, these sorts of jumpers tend to be a bit itchy around the neck. Fortunately, the worries slip away once you put it on.

It may feel weighty in your hands, but the jumper is surprisingly light when you're wearing it. That's not at the expense of warmth either. It'll stand up to a cold wind just fine, and if you want to finish that Seventh Doctor look, slipping on a jacket won't make you sweat off 10lbs.

I've never worn a tank top before, so it initially felt odd not having sleeves. But it's no different from a body warmer and you soon get used to it. At least you know it won't get damaged when you're doing your daily activities (or fighting fellow fans to get to meet a celebrity or find back issues at conventions).

There's no issue with the neckline either: it feels really comfortable. More than that – unnoticeable. It doesn't sit too high and it doesn't itch. That's important and pretty rare.

The pockets are, essentially, only there for decoration. They're probably too thin to hold much more than a pen or some

jelly babies. That's not really the point of this faithful recreation though. I doubt any fan would want to risk wrecking it by shoving in anything heavy.

You can't escape the fact that this is an unusual item, but that makes it all the better.

I like to imagine McCoy wearing this jumper in a recording booth, threatening Daleks, Cybermen, and Haemovores for Big Finish. He definitely owns one and wears it to conventions, so Lovarzi's Seventh Doctor Sweater has the approval of the Doctor himself. That's pretty darn cool. But actually, it's gained more importance since its initial release. This sweater has been seen numerous times in *Doctor Who* itself! Yep, really: the BBC has used various items from Lovarzi on-screen, including in *The Zygon Invasion/ The Zygon Inversion*, as worn by Osgood, and in *The Power of the Doctor*, where it's worn by Jodie Whittaker's Thirteenth Doctor... and Sacha Dhawan's Master (albeit as the Doctor too!).

The Seventh Doctor is brilliant. His stories are brilliant. Well done to Lovarzi for making something equally brilliant.



My Earliest Doctor Who Memory

Tony Stokes



Who memory. That elusive trickster. What is your earliest *Who* memory? There is folklore in my family that I was born during an episode of *Doctor Who*. Ignoring the question of why my family wasn't giving more attention to my arrival, there is one problem with that notion: my year of birth. I was born in 1961, two years before Ms Lambert started her fight to get the programme running.

So my earliest memory is *An Unearthly Child*? Right. Probably not. I had just turned 2 and the country was about to be gripped by the Big Freeze. And that is wrong too. The Big Freeze was at the other end of the year. I may have been poring over the papers and social media to ascertain what was going on in the world. The deaths of C S Lewis, Aldous Huxley, and someone in Dallas. And that is wrong too. I am a genius, as you may have noticed, but I wasn't reading at the age of 2. I

was probably busy chewing on a Farley Rusk.

That's the thing about memory: to quote John Nathan-Turner, it cheats. *Doctor Who* memories are a particularly knotty issue. Do our memories accurately reflect what happened? I remember watching the TARDIS in a scrapyard. But it is from the *Five Faces of Doctor Who* season in the early '80s. I have clear memories from *The Evil of the Daleks*. But is that from its original transmission? And, even if so, was it the 1967 showing or the repeat over the summer break a year later? Or is it from archive material? (Actually, this one is easier for me. I am sure that I have memories from the first showing. I remember that I saw the repeat too. And I remember remembering at the time that I had seen it before. *The Evil of the Daleks* is my favourite *Doctor Who* story.)



This is turning into a stroll down memory lane and hoping to avoid it becoming a Cheating Miss Memory Cul-De-Sac.

Because I have two adventures that I *know* that I saw on the BBC on original transmission.

It's a dark stormy day (or evening); the scene is the exterior of a barn. It is snowing. The Doctor bites into a hard sweet and howls in pain.

Looking back over nearly 60 years and imagining anyone would be foolish enough to let me anywhere near running the programme, I might have written a story that sends the TARDIS team hastening back to Tombstone to get the Doctor's tooth fixed. That would have been a *bad* idea and I am glad no one did it. The memory suggests that *The Gunfighters* and *The Tenth Planet* were the same story.

The first story that I am certain I saw at the time (and this is based on a snatch of memory) is *The Highlanders*. I have a strong, somewhat hazy memory of highlanders at the noose, about to be hanged.

A much clearer recollection is of Ben and Polly (and by extension Jamie and the Doctor) suspended over a pool about to be sacrificed. And then there was a shark!

My earliest *Doctor Who* memory, then, is the end of Episode One of *The Underwater Menace*. The garbled memories I have mentioned above hint that I was already watching by then, so that cannot be the story that got me watching. Which is a relief. It would be embarrassing if I got turned into a fan by Professor Zaroff and his Fish People.

Actually that raises a secondary question about the persistence of memory. Do we remember classic favourites because they are great or because we haven't seen them in an age and the memory really does cheat?

Of course, that is slightly less of a factor now we have access to so much of it. Maybe someone will look into it in the future. Might be worth a look at the stories where the nature of memory is examined...



Happy 20th Birthday, Ruby Sunday

Andrew Hsieh



On the morning of 24th December 2024, Christmas Eve, Ruby woke up to receive the warmest birthday hug from her biological mother Louise Miller, with her adoptive mother Carla Sunday joining them a moment later. Her adoptive grandmother Cherry, meanwhile, was still in bed, asking for her cup of tea (as per usual).

Ruby never thought she would celebrate her 20th birthday with her birth mother, as well as their first Christmas together. They originally had plans to meet up with her birth father, William Benjamin Garnet for dinner, until Rose Noble invited the Sundays for a special festive gathering at her uncle's house. Not wanting to make them feel left out, Ruby decided to invite Will and her best friend Trudy along, which they both accepted.

Rose's father, Shaun Temple, came to pick them up in his taxi, but there weren't enough seats to fit everybody in. Carla didn't want to leave Cherry behind on her own, as their neighbour Mrs Flood was nowhere to be seen; Abdul once speculated that she probably moved out, sometime after the dust storm incident which temporarily wiped out the human race.

It snowed throughout the journey as Shaun drove into the countryside, outside of London, followed by Will's car with Carla and Cherry sitting in the back. Louise and Shaun had a laugh about parenting, while Ruby and Trudy chatted nonstop. Ruby wasn't sure if the snow had anything to do with her, or whether it had been forecast; probably just a coincidence (without goblins up to their tricks).

As both cars parked along the driveway, Rose came out to greet everybody and rush them out of the cold and into her uncle's house. Then they headed straight for the living room, only to receive a —

“Surprise!”

— from Donna Noble and her mum Sylvia, alongside Melanie Bush and a tall gentleman

with thick brown hair and sideburns. Ruby's jaw dropped upon seeing all the birthday decorations with her name on, as Mel said in a sing-song voice: "Happy Birthday, Ruby!"

"Oh," she gasped, almost bursting into tears as everybody applauded, "I never thought this Christmas would end up being a million times better than last year's!"

"A pleasure to meet you, Ruby," said the tall gentleman who came up to her, "I've heard all about you from my favourite niece Rosalinda and Mad Aunty Mel."

"Hang on," Ruby paused for a moment, "Why do I get the feeling that we know each other?"

"Well," he stumbled, "everything's all timey wimey, so..."

"You're the Doctor!"

"Yep, hello!"

She couldn't help but give him a hug, realising that he's the same person who she travelled with. Or would soon be travelling with, from his perspective.

"How's it been, living your life on Earth?"

"Relaxing, so far. I've Donna checking in on me."

"A delight to meet you at last, Ruby," Donna greeted, "And this is my mum, Sylvia."

"The evil stepmother," the Doctor added.

"Oh, don't you start," Sylvia laughed, playfully nudging him.

"Well, you and my nan Cherry would certainly get along. She's always demanding a cup of tea."

"Guess I'll go and put the kettle on, just in case..."

As Sylvia went into the kitchen, Ruby turned to look at the framed photograph of an elderly man in his wheelchair, wearing a flat cap. "Who's he?"

"Wilfred Mott," said Donna, "my beloved Gramps, always stargazing and reminiscing about his days as a soldier."

The Doctor inhaled, trying hard not to shed any tears. "Still remember that Christmas where I first met him at his newspaper stand. I love Wilf. Very dearly."

There was a moment of silence, and then —

"Anyway, Rubes, I've got something very special to show you." The Doctor took his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket and used it like a stylus pen to draw a rectangle in midair,

right in front of the Mavity film poster on the wall. The shape turned into a holographic screen, displaying what appeared to be a transmission from UNIT.

“I didn’t know it could do that,” Ruby exclaimed, admiring its amazing function.

“Everybody gather round, please!” Donna called.

“This is the Doctor, calling the Vlinx at UNIT Headquarters, London.”

“Receiving loud and clear, Doctor,” the Vlinx announced from the other end of the call. “Now playing: Pre-recorded birthday greetings for Ruby Sunday.”

And there was Kate Lethbridge-Stewart with Colonel Christofer Ibrahim, and scientific advisors Shirley Anne Bingham and Morris Gibbons; altogether on display. They each expressed their sincerest apologies that they couldn’t be there, whilst wishing her a happy birthday, as they were on assignment in Geneva.

Once the video finished, the holographic screen vanished with everybody giving a round of applause. Ruby also received kisses from her birth parents.

Then the Doctor asked, “Right, who’s hungry for a Christmas feast?”

During lunch, with roast turkey (plus a vegan equivalent) and all the traditional trimmings, the Doctor told stories about some of his past adventures. One where he met a camera operator named Derek, who operated a Dalek casing in a news studio. And also that time when he and Sarah Jane Smith took down a state-controlled propaganda corporation, run by a corrupt CEO.

Afterwards, everybody went off to do different activities in groups. Donna, Mel, Louise, and Carla gossiped, and later sang along to Slade’s *Merry Xmas Everybody* on the radio. Shaun and Will played Monopoly, while Sylvia and Cherry had tea in the kitchen.

Rose bonded with Trudy by discussing transgender rights, as well as experiences of being bullied at school. The Doctor and Ruby joined their conversation when Rose started talking about the incident where Callum Wingate and his mates, Graham and Laurence, deadnamed her whilst riding their bikes. Callum later got suspended for shouting transphobic slurs in class, upon learning that Donna had a serious conversation with his mum, Josie.

Hours later, the Doctor pondered whether he would remember celebrating Christmas with all his friends, especially his future companion. Ruby reminded him that he’ll see her again, by looking out for goblins and the church where her mum left her, twenty years ago.

Then they heard four knocks at the door. The Doctor immediately recognised the rhythm, which sounded like the heartbeat of a Time Lord.

“Honey, I’m home!”

Ruby was in complete disbelief when she heard a very familiar voice. As the Doctor went to the door, it suddenly opened from outside to reveal his future self using his sonic screwdriver.

“Oh, way hey!”

“Hello, me!”

They both embraced in the warmest hug, just like last time. Then the future Doctor cuddled the birthday girl whilst lifting her up, almost breaking into song by quoting the chorus of the Kaiser Chiefs’ hit.

“I knew you’d come back,” she squealed.

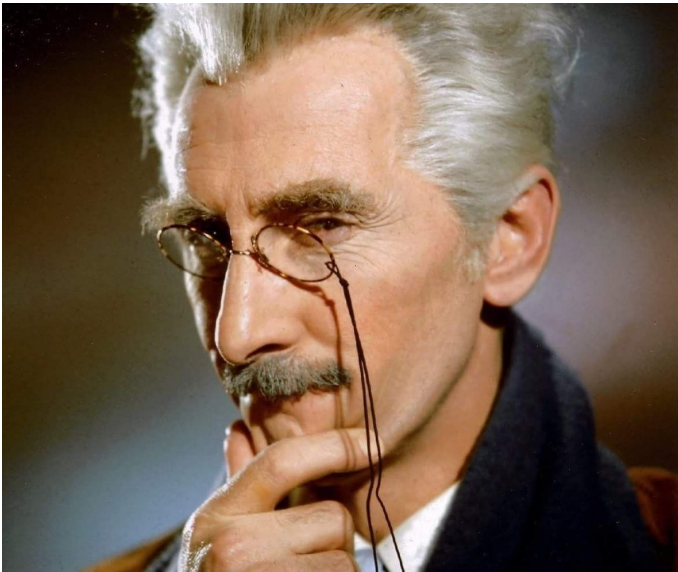
“Oh, babes,” the future Doctor began, almost shedding a tear, “Why would I forget your 20th? Happy Birthday, Ruby.”

Closing the door behind them, the two Doctors and Ruby went into the living room and resumed celebrating with their friends and family; right through until after midnight, the start of Christmas Day.

She had never been so happy in her life.

How to Tell If You Are A True Doctor Who Fan: Take the Doctor Who Companion's Test!

Simon Danes



You may think you are a *Doctor Who* fan, dear reader, but *are you really?* Are you? Does it worry you that you may be an imposter, a dilettante, a dabbler, a die-soft rather than die-hard fan?

Well: do not worry! Set your mind at rest! Simply take the DWC's simple test! Score 1 point for every one of the questions you can answer "yes" to. Then add up your score and check the diagnostic at the end of the test to establish whether you are, indeed, a true *Doctor Who* fan.

1. When drying your hands in a public convenience, do you bring them up close to the drier's nozzle and then take them away again, repeating this several times, because it sounds like the TARDIS's take off noise?

2. When taking the lid off a bottle of washing liquid or fabric conditioner, do you secretly push it along the counter with your hand to imitate a gliding motion, while saying, "Exterminate! Exterminate!" to yourself – and then guiltily pretend you weren't doing anything when your

spouse, child, or similar enters the room?

3. In the days of old fashioned phones with wires and stuff, did you check no one was watching, then clamp the phone to your chest, assume a robotic stance and a blank face, and say in a buzzing voice, "There is now one hour to Invasion Time"?

4. Have you ever made a pilgrimage to Earl's Court tube station, so you can stand outside for about four hours and gawp, lost in wonder, love and admiration, at the police box stationed outside it?

5. You're watching *Planet of Evil* and your 15-year-old daughter, who quite likes the David Tennant stories, wanders in. She giggles at the anti-matter monster and says it's rubbish. Do you immediately telephone your solicitor and tell him to alter your will, to disinherit her?

6. When peeling potatoes, you come across a very large and round one. Do you cut it in half, gouge out a slit-like mouth and two eyes, and mutter, "I claim this planet for the glory of the Sontaran Empire"?

7. Have you downloaded the font called "Dalek" and shamefacedly added it into the fonts available on Word?

8. You're waiting in a supermarket car park. Do you take a quick look round, assure yourself that no-one's watching, then take your tyre pressure gauge out of the car's glove compartment, hold it vertically before your eyes, and make strange buzzing noises?

9. Do you favour puffy quilted jackets because you secretly think they make you look like Field-Major Styre in full battle armour?

10. Have you ever Googled "Georgian state dancers" and watched them on YouTube?

11. You find a large house spider on your wall. Being a humane sort of person, you gently trap it using a beer glass and a piece of card. However, prior to defenestration, do you hold it up and say, in a cold, feminine voice, “I have come to give you the power you seek”?

12. Do you ever secretly go down to the kitchen in the dead of night, take an egg whisk out of the drawer and the plunger out from under the sink, put a pudding basin on your head and cavort around the room saying, “Daleks conquer and destroy! Daleks conquer and destroy!”

13. When you lift the lid on the loo, do you actually secretly hope to discover that Davros is hiding inside it, like he was in *Remembrance of the Daleks*?

14. Have you seen *This Sporting Life*?

15. Have you blu-tacked a label next to the rear window heater button in your car, reading “Fast Return Switch”? (Remember to hide it if anyone else is going to be in the car with you.)

16. Have you got a copy of the rarest Target novel, *The Wheel in Space* (and if you have, will you sell it to me for 20 quid)?

17. You’re watching the news, and pictures of Westminster Bridge and St Paul’s Cathedral (including the steps) come up. Do you immediately think of Daleks and Cybermen? (NB: it has to be “immediately”. If you have to think about it, it doesn’t count.)

18. You walk past a CO2 fire extinguisher. Do you have to fight very hard against the temptation to let it off, because that would be brilliant because you could pretend to be a Dalek from the Peter Cushing movies?

19. In the winter (and assuming no one’s watching) when you’re walking through the snow, do you suddenly assume a lurching gait, hold your forearms out in front of you, hold your hands in the shape

of big clamps, hiss loudly as you breathe in and out, and say things like, “Are you capable – ssssss, ssssss – of operating – ssssss – the T-mat mechanism?”?

20. Do you like wearing mirrored shades on the sole grounds that you think they make you look like the Exxilon high priest?

21. Do you secretly refer to your fridge as “the Quark”?

22. Have you ever asked your wife or girlfriend (or other random female personage) to stand in the middle of a small rug, so that you can shout, “Sarah: get off that mandala!” at her?

23. Have you entered “Totter’s Lane, London” on Google maps (and if not, why not)?

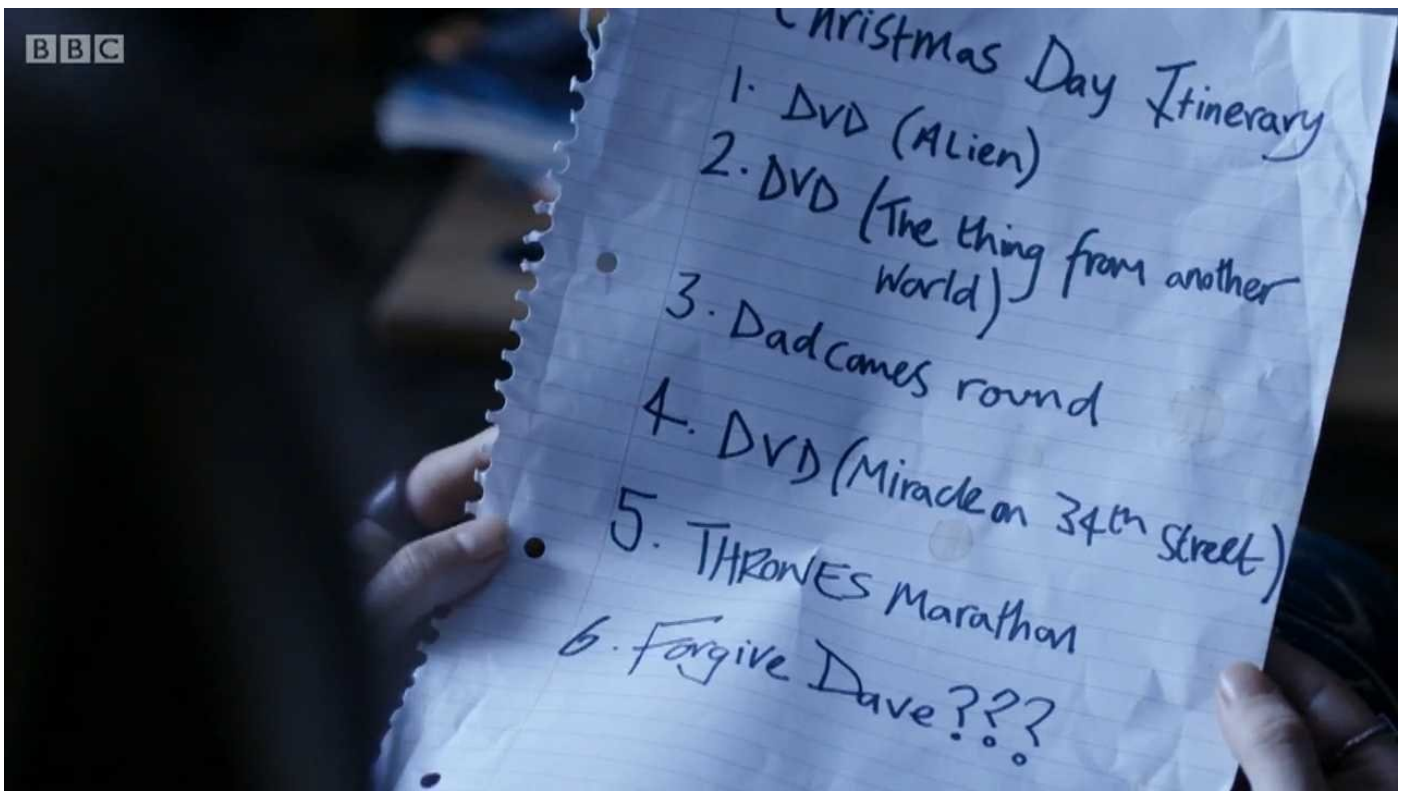
24. Have you ever answered the phone by saying, “Contact has been made” or “Trap One receiving you, over”?

25. When the rest of the family are enjoying holidaying on the beach, would you secretly rather be in a quarry?



26. Once it’s possible to personalise Alexa fully, are you intending to program it to respond to the name “Packer”, and for it to answer, “Yes, Mr Vaughn”? (That would be so cool, wouldn’t it? Especially if you could elongate and drawl out the word “Pack-aaarr”.)

27. Have you ever named one or more of your pets after a character from *Doctor Who*? (I once had a gerbil called Morbius. Other pet name choices might include Adric, Colonel Masters, Eldrad,



Mavic Chen, Borusa, Channing, Benton, and Sutekh. A cat called Koquillion would be really good.)

28. When in a rage, have you ever called anyone a “ham-fisted bun vendor”? (Yes you have. Don’t lie.)

29. If you ever come across a grand piano with its lid up, are you ever tempted to scrape your front door key along the fattest string? (I’ve done this. It’s great.)

30. When eating spaghetti, do you dangle the ends out of your mouth because you think it makes you look like an Ood?

31. Have you ever held a canister of shaving foam next to your chest and then squirted it out so that you can pretend to be a dying Cyberman?

32. Do you know who Gilbert MacKenzie Trench is?

33. Have you ever lain awake at night, troubled by thoughts as to why the TARDIS telepathic circuits didn’t translate the German spoken in *The War Games* (e.g. *Wer sint diese Leute?* and *Sie sind englische Spione!* and *Sie kamen in etwas namens TARDIS!*)?

How Big a Fan Are You?

Diagnostic scores to establish whether you are, indeed, a true *Doctor Who* fan.

33. Don’t be silly.

20-32. Well done. You have established that you are a true *Doctor Who* fan. Reward yourself with a snack of jelly babies, gobstoppers, celery or fish fingers and custard. Or uncork a bottle of expensive red if you like Pertwee.

10-19. Borderline. You clearly like *Doctor Who* and are a fan but consider: are you sufficiently fanatical? Does it dominate and control your life enough? Should you not commit yourself more?

Below 10: Dear dear dear dear. How very disturbing.



10 Reasons You Should Watch *Blakes 7*

Jonathan Appleton

2024 saw the release of a special Blu-ray boxset of the BBC's classic late 1970s/early 1980s sci-fi series *Blakes 7*. And of course, this is a good excuse to give the programme a try if you've never done so before, or indeed to relive your youth and catch the episodes again if you were there first time around.

We at the DWC love our classic TV sci-fi and we know a great show when we see one – so set speed 'standard by twelve' as we run through 10 reasons why you really, *really* should watch *Blakes 7*!

1. Terry Nation's *Blakes 7*

The brainchild of the Daleks creator, the series is a fine example of Nation's gift for creating strong series formats and engaging storytelling. Unlikely though it may sound, he reportedly pitched *Blakes 7* to the BBC as 'the Dirty Dozen in space' at a time when they were open to ideas for a replacement for long-running (and firmly Earth-based) *Z Cars* spin-off, *Softly Softly*. Nation played to his strengths in his proposal to corporation bosses, promising 'cracking *Boy's Own* kidult sci-fi, a space-western adventure, a modern swashbuckler'.

The series certainly includes some familiar Nation tropes – second season episode *Countdown*, for example, features a deadly radiation device set to wipe out an entire world's population and a race



against the clock to, well, stop the countdown. But the episode goes beyond clichés with a nicely written encounter between Avon and the brother of his partner who was captured and tortured by the Federation, with the two men forced to put their differences aside as the timer runs down.

2. Dangerous Visions

Blakes 7 had a remarkably bleak premise for a primetime BBC1 drama, although it has to be said that bleakness was a common factor in many series in that era. First episode, *The Way Back* sees Blake discover that his memory has been wiped by an oppressive regime which uses drugs to control the population and brutally

suppresses any show of dissent. Before the opening 50 minutes are up, we see a group of dissidents slaughtered in cold blood by black-clad masked troopers, Blake convicted of trumped up child abuse charges, then being sent off on a prison ship for a life of exile on a barren alien world.

3. *Doctor Who* Connections

Fans of 1970s *Doctor Who* will find much to enjoy in *Blakes 7*, a fact which isn't surprising given that so many of the same people were involved in both series. Besides Nation thinking the whole thing up, there was long-time *Doctor Who* director David Maloney as producer for series 1- 3 working alongside Chris Boucher (*Robots of Death*), script editor throughout the show's whole run. Boucher is something of an unsung hero of *Blakes 7*, having worked hard to put meat on the bones of Nation's scripts in the first series when Terry was over-stretched after committing to writing all 13 episodes.

Doctor Who legend, Robert Holmes wrote some of the finest instalments, Dudley Simpson composed the music, and there were numerous credits for various set designers, costume designers, and visual effects artists whose names will be familiar to *Doctor Who* fans.

4. Very Special Effects

If there's one thing guaranteed to annoy a *Blakes 7* fan, it's when someone says they've never watched the series because of its reputation for bad special effects. It has to be said that, like several *Doctor*

Who stories over the years, many of the effects don't look too special. But set against that some of the glorious model work on the beautifully designed Liberator and other craft in the series which stands up remarkably well today.

And though there are many anecdotes about how the chamber-like set of the Liberator's flight deck was held together by glue and staples, it looks wonderful on-screen.

5. Character Options

No, not the toy company.

Some of the most interesting choices made in creating *Blakes 7* were in its characters. Playing Blake, Gareth Thomas found himself frustrated by the limitations involved in portraying the show's heroic lead, though he certainly made the most of the material he was given and emphasised the character's driven, obsessive side.

Thomas must have envied his co-star, Paul Darrow who played Avon, a self-centred, almost sociopathic computer genius who always seemed ready to sell out the rebellion (and his crewmates) if the situation called for it, and who would take over lead-





ing the crew when Thomas left after two series. Jacqueline Pearce as Servalan relished every moment playing a ground-breaking role as Blake's nemesis in a rare example of a female lead villain in a mainstream show.

6. Future Tech

One of the most memorable aspects of *Blake's 7* for many people was its hardware. The Liberator's sleek 'hair curlers in a holster' weapons (modelled by Gareth Thomas above) were a wonderfully original take on sci-fi weaponry. And I only have to hear the zapping of a Federation trooper's blaster (as held by Sally Knyvette as Jenna and Jan Chappell playing Cally in the photo) to be taken right back to Monday nights in 1978.

Then there were the teleport bracelets, so desirable on set that stocks ran dangerously low over the course of production.

7. Memorable Journeys

Every fan has their favourites, but for my money, you really should look out for a number of standout episodes.

Star One sees the culmination of Blake's quest to find the Federation's secret command centre, just as the galaxy is being invaded. Series 3's *City at the Edge of the World* sees Vila take the leading role with a wonderfully unrestrained Colin Baker as wanted criminal Bayban the Butcher. Later that season, in *Rumours of Death*, Avon finds out exactly what became of his beloved Anna Grant (it doesn't go well...). A favourite of many is *Orbit* in the final season, which has a characteristically dark script by Robert Holmes and shows just how far Avon is prepared to go in looking after number one.

8. Maximum Power!

Blake's 7 was made in the same era as the likes of *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* and *Flash Gordon* and its reputation has sometimes suffered through

being lumped together with those kind of camp classics. As we've seen, there was rather more to it than that but it has to be said that it had its OTT moments, none more so than Servalan's glorious instruction at the climax of *Terminal* when she finally got her hands on the Liberator. It's a moment so memorable that it later gave its name to a brilliantly humorous yet affectionate series guide republished by Ten Acre Films.

9. That Ending...

You may wish to look away now if you don't want to know what happens in the last episode...

Rarely has a series ended in such a stark, bleak moment of violence as *Blakes 7*. Series 4 conclusion, *Blake*, screened just before Christmas 1981, sees Avon finally succeed in tracking down his former sparring partner, now living out a tough existence as a bounty hunter and having seemingly sold out his ideals. But the long-

awaited reunion ends in disaster when a misunderstanding leads to a (remarkably gory) blood bath... Around 10 million viewers were watching, traumatised over their egg nog, as Avon raised his gun one last time...

10. Continuing Adventures

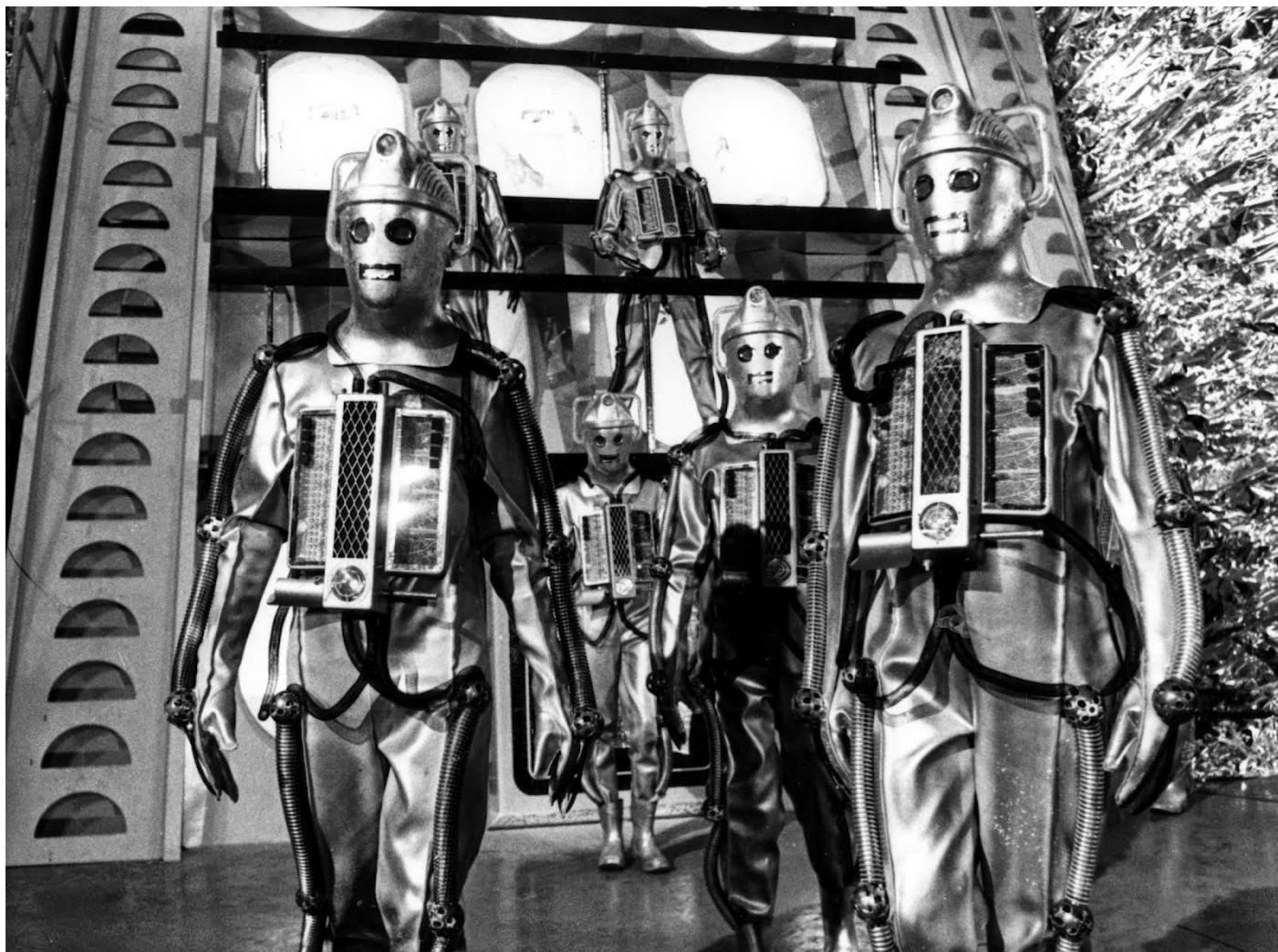
As with *Doctor Who*, it was the fans who kept the series alive. *Blakes 7* has unsurprisingly been a candidate for a TV revival on a number of occasions without anything concrete resulting, but Big Finish has made a success of it with a well-received batch of releases featuring the original cast.

Recommendations include award-winning *Liberator Chronicles* entry *The Armageddon Storm*, full cast drama *Warship* which fills in the gap between the second and third series, and *The Way Ahead*, a newly released 40th anniversary special consisting of two linked episodes.



What's In A Name: The Tomb of the Cybermen

Philip Bates



One of the most annoying things about *Doctor Who* serial titles – aside from the messy business of deciding whether it's *The Edge of Destruction* or *Inside the Spaceship* – is trying to remember which begin with “The”. Some are easy. *The Long Game*. Easy. *The Twin Dilemma*. Easy. *The Web of Fear*. Easy. These simply wouldn't sound right without “The” at their beginnings.

The Evil of the Daleks? Always questionable. *Colony in Space*? Similar. *The Silurians*? Trick question.

Then there's that 1967 Cyberman story in

which the Second Doctor (Patrick Troughton) visits the planet Telos. We should confirm right now, *The Tomb of the Cybermen* is, indeed, *The Tomb of the Cybermen*. Let that forever be settled, until the next time we forget and have to check the DVD cover.

Would we have had the same troubles if the serial had stuck with its working titles, *The Ice Tombs of Telos* or *The Cybermen Planet*? In the latter case, it feels wrong without “The”; in the former, we'd be in the same boat, wouldn't we? Nonetheless, we've got *The Tomb of the*



Cybermen, and honestly, it's a perfect name. It's much punchier than *The Ice Tombs of Telos* and doesn't make fans scream "BUT THAT'S MONDAS", as *The Cybermen Planet* surely would. It's also very important, at least in the history of *Doctor Who* titles.

This is the first time the Cybermen are included in a story's name. You might not consider this particularly surprising; after all, it's only their third adventure, following *The Tenth Planet* and *The Moonbase*. However, it might be shocking to consider that there's only five stories between 1966 and 2024 which feature the word, "Cybermen" in their names: *The Tomb of the Cybermen*; *Revenge of the Cybermen*; *Attack of the Cybermen*; *Rise of the Cybermen/ The Age of Steel*; and *Ascension of the Cybermen/ The Timeless Children*. Compare that to the Daleks, monsters that revel in their own Power, show off their Master Plan, and boast of Victory...

Of course, away from television, other formats have taken *Tomb's* "of the Cybermen" structure, including audios (*Legend of the Cybermen*), novels (*Plague*

of the Cybermen), and comics (*Supremacy of the Cybermen*).

Unsurprisingly, the singular "Cyberman" has never featured in the title of the TV story, although the working title of *Tomb* varied between *The Cybermen Planet* and *The Cyberman Planet*.

This is also the only time, at the time of writing, that "Tomb" has been included in a serial's name. We can trace this Middle English word (which, as a noun, naturally refers to burial ground, and so instantly feels suitably sinister) back to the Greek, *Týmbos* (a burial mound), and further to the Latin, *Tumēre*, meaning "to swell". The two might be correlated due to the displaced earth after a burial and a casket's raising of the ground (i.e. a swelling), or perhaps as a result of gas escaping; in fact, there were once reports of over-pressurised coffins exploding! (This is also where we get our word, "Tumour" from.)

The terms translated to Old French into the word, "*Tombe*": this is still used in France to mean a grave, although monuments are further referred to as "*Tombeau*". Pleasingly, the latter was also the name of a musical composition commemorating the death of an important person, typically in the 17th Century but with brief recurrences for the mournful genre in the 18th and 20th centuries.

Its name rather suits *The Tomb of the Cybermen*, right? After all, most fans think the serial is pretty darn *swell*.

No? Suit yourselves.

A Closer Look at the Fifteenth Doctor Action Figure From Character Options

Rick Lundeen



out, the single figures were close behind, so I purchased the Ncuti Gatwa Doctor figure.

The detail is wonderful, much like the set that featured David Tennant's Fourteenth Doctor and Jodie Whittaker's Thirteenth Doctor dressed in her *Power of the Doctor* multi-Doctor clothing ensemble. Although as nice and detailed as they were, Ncuti seems another slight level up as far as detail and likeness goes. His facial features, his necklace, rings, his jumper, coat, trainers: all incredibly detailed.

One of the highlights of a new Doctor is when Character Options presents a brand new action figure of that incarnation. For this Christmas, there's a new present to be given to the avid *Doctor Who* fan collector.

Character Options solicited an online exclusive two-figure set featuring Ncuti Gatwa as the Fifteenth Doctor and Millie Gibson as Ruby Sunday.

Living in these United States, with exorbitant shipping prices across the pond, and only wanting the Doctor and not the current companion, I opted to wait for the company to sell the Fifteenth Doctor on his own.

It seemed unusual to me that they waited so long to get these figures out there in the first place, months after Season 1/14/40/flapdoodle ended, but once the set came

I'm forced to conclude that Character Options has either started doing the full body computer scan of the actors to transmogrify said 3D image into the detailed action figures, or, if they were already scanning past actors, it feels like they've upgraded the equipment because they especially capture the Fifteenth Doctor *perfectly*.

As far as pose-ability, he's as limited as most Character Options figures. The long coat prohibits a full running position, and you can't go too crazy on arm movement but for my purposes, merely displaying him along with all the past incarnations, it works wonderfully.

I suppose my only real critique would be his expression. He's got a somewhat neutral expression — really, the neutral expression you might have if you were in a full body scanner! Which presents a slight

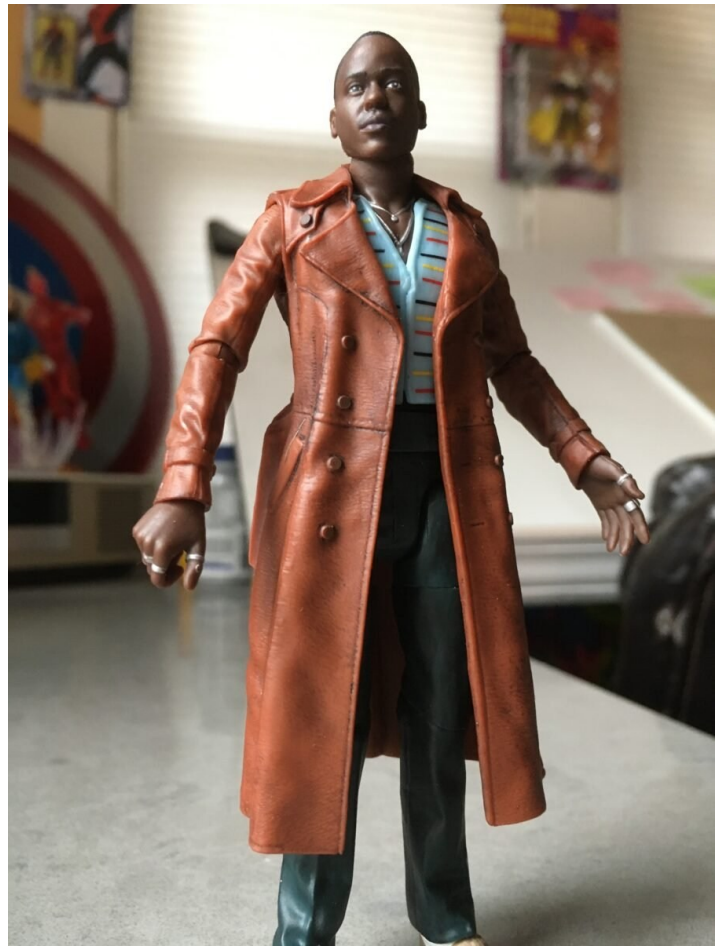
dilemma.

For the vast majority of viewers, Ncuti hardly ever has a neutral expression on his face. He's either smiling or crying.

And although having him crying would be appropriate enough, in all fairness, he should be smiling. So, slight gaff there.

Still, overall, a very nice figure that I can recommend heartily if you are a completist with this hobby as I am.

Not that I get each and every figure Character Options comes out with — that way lies financial ruin and insanity, at least for me. But I do have each and every version of the Doctor that's been on the show... and that's enough for me!



10 New Series Adventures Novels All Doctor Who Fans Should Read

Philip Bates



Only Human

The New Series Adventures have had a tough time of it. To many, their mostly-straight-forward plots were a step down from BBC Past Doctor Adventures, but such judgements are very unfair. Much of these criticisms, I feel, stem from the fact that they superseded a successful and greatly-loved range, leaving anyone who wanted to read about the further tales of the First to Eighth Doctors with nowhere to turn. But for newcomers to *Doctor Who*, this new range was a great stepping-on point. The range went from strength to strength.

So now it's surely time for fans new and old to start (or restart) their New Series Adventures journey. Here are 10 books to get you going.

Sadly, only six books were released featuring Christopher Eccleston's Ninth Doctor, but while the first three arguably struggle to nail this incarnation of the Time Lord, September 2005's three books were much more fitting for the series. (That's not to say you should ignore *The Clockwise Man*, *The Monsters Inside*, and *Winner Takes All* – they're all still well worth a read.)

I especially enjoyed *The Deviant Strain*, but ask most people and the highlight of this era was *Only Human*, written by Gareth Roberts. It was apparently on the strength of this book and his work on the *Doctor Who Magazine* comic strip that got Roberts the TV gig.

And it is an impressive novel. There's a confidence and breeziness to the narrative, tackling an era in human history that *Doctor Who* often avoids: the Stone Age. Perhaps other authors are worried by comparisons to *An Unearthly Child*? Only *Human* proved such a success, it was rereleased in March 2013 in paperback to celebrate the show's fiftieth anniversary. The Ninth Doctor, Rose Tyler, Captain Jack Harkness, and a Neanderthal man in 2006. What's not to love?

The Feast of the Drowned

Only the second novel to star the Tenth Doctor, *The Feast of the Drowned* by Stephen Cole hits the ground running. It's a chilling and thrilling tale set in contemporary London that very much draws from the television stories of its time and, in a way, foreshadows *Army of Ghosts* and *The Waters of Mars* (with just a hint of *Voyage of the Damned* too).

Rose comes back home to learn that her friend's brother died when the naval cruiser he served on sank in the North Sea. And his ghost has returned to them, begging to be saved from the titular feast. Creepy premise, right?

I've two main memories of this story: firstly, when the ship is towed back to London, there's a particularly haunting scene as everyone in the vicinity suddenly collapses. It really stayed with me. And the second memory isn't from the novel at all – but from the audiobook. It's narrated by David Tennant and his impression of Billie Piper is an absolute treat. Hilarious!

Sting of the Zygons

I always felt it was a shame that Russell T Davies didn't bring back the shape-shifting Zygons during the Tenth Doctor tenure; they are, after all, Tennant's favourite ever *Doctor Who* monster. The oversight was obviously corrected in *The Day of the Doctor*, but until then, our only consolation was this April 2007 novel, an historical tale set in the Lake District.

With body-swapping mayhem, and the search for the Beast of Westmorland underway – a hunt even King Edward VII is attending – *Sting of the Zygons* feels very much like a sequel to 1975's *Terror of the Zygons*.

Written by Stephen Cole, it also feels very fresh as a result of being the first novel to feature Freema Agyeman's Martha Jones, who debuted in *Smith and Jones* less than a month before the book's publication.

Sting of the Zygons was in the running for DWM's Merchandise Awards that year, but it was just pipped to the post by *The Doctor Who Storybook 2008*, and...

Forever Autumn

Yep, this spooky novel won first place, named 2007's best fiction book. Considering the competition (which also included further fantastic books in the range like *Wooden Heart* and *Sick Building*), that's a considerable achievement!

It's written by Mark Morris, his first for the New Series Adventures range but readers were familiar with his work from the Past Doctor Adventures, for which he'd

written *The Bodysnatchers* (starring the Zygons) and *Deep Blue*. He'd go on to author a *Torchwood* novel, *Bay of the Dead*, and one more story for the New Series books: the similarly-excellent *Ghosts of India*, starring the Tenth Doctor, Donna Noble... and Gandhi.

Forever Autumn is a genuinely scary book set at Hallowe'en in the small New England town of Blackwood Falls. It reminds me of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the astonishing book by sci-fi genius, Ray Bradbury. If that and the stunning cover aren't enough to convince you to read it, nothing will.

The Story of Martha

The only short story collection published in the New Series Adventures range, *The Story of Martha* was a breath of fresh air upon its release on Boxing Day 2008, and remains just as engaging now as it was then.

Taking place in the Year That Never Was, the book's greatest accomplishment is making *The Sound of Drums/ Last of the Time Lords* enjoyable. The main thrust of the narrative, written by Dan Abnett, is Martha's trip around the world, hiding from the Master while she spreads the message of the Doctor. It adds depth and context to the *Doctor Who* Series 3 finale, and really enriches the serial as a whole. If you're worried it's just 238 pages of Martha running from the Toclafane, you'll be pleasantly surprised: the bulk of this tome is made up of four stories – *The Weeping* by David Roden, *Breathing*



Space by Steve Lockley and Paul Lewis, *The Frozen Wastes* by Dalek scribe Rob Shearman, and *Star-Crossed* by Simon Jowett – that the Doctor's companion tells about her travels in time and space. It's a great premise, but it's at its most captivating when exploring details from *Last of the Time Lords* – more specifically, when the Master burns the islands of Japan, leaving Martha as the only survivor.

Beautiful Chaos

2009 saw a slew of books that starred David Tennant's incarnation of the Time Lord coming up against Slitheen, Autons, Daleks, and all manner of aliens – but arguably the best returning monster came as a very special Christmas present in

2008.

Ah, but I can't tell you which monster it is. No, that would ruin the surprise. It's a much-loved Fourth Doctor alien.

Beautiful Chaos is special for another reason, however: it's a last hurrah for the Tenth Doctor and Donna Noble. Indeed, the preface and epilogue are both set after *Journey's End*, with Wilfred Mott saddened by his memory-wiped granddaughter. It's even more interesting now that the events of *The Star Beast* reintroduced Donna and Wilf. The main story is a thrilling one, but it's made poignant by these bookending scenes which hammer home just how great Catherine Tate is. Written by Gary Russell, the novel was reprinted in 2013 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary.

Dead of Winter

Having written *Dead Air*, many stories in Big Finish's *Torchwood* range, and *The Blood Cell*, James Goss has a great track

record. If you'd like to delve into his previous work, *Dead of Winter* is a great place to start. In fact, to me, this 2011 book is the height of the New Series Adventures. It helps that it features my favourite TARDIS team: the Eleventh Doctor, Amy Pond, and Rory Williams.

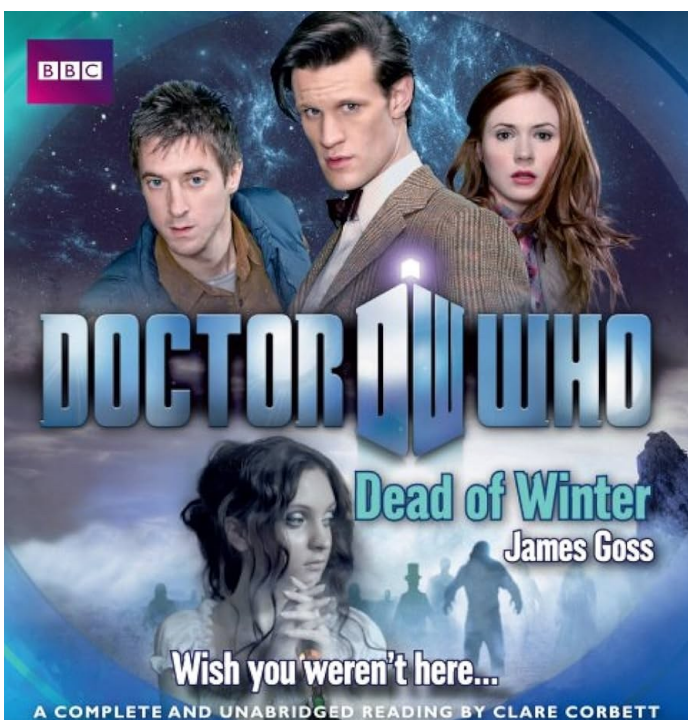
We're thrown into an 18th Century medical clinic where the ill are wheeled out into the mist and there, something talks to them. The reader's on the back foot: nothing seems quite right and you soon realise why. There's a great moment when all the previous events come into focus again, and you'll want to reread it in light of this revelation.

The tone is beautifully grim, but the Doctor and co. maintain that joy and wonder present in their TV adventures. It very much feels like something that could slot into Matt Smith's tenure in the TARDIS – but perhaps most importantly, I don't think it could be achieved half as effectively on television. Seriously, read it.

Hunter's Moon

The quality of the New Series Adventures' Eleventh Doctor books is astounding, and it's hard to pick any particular highlights. And *Dead of Winter* has tough competition from this startling tale, which was released alongside the James Goss book and Una McCormack's *The Way Through The Woods* in April 2011.

It's dark, it's gritty, and it's brilliant. Paul Finch gives us a story where the Doctor must pretend to be a mercenary in order to track down Rory, who was kidnapped by



the crime lord Xorg Krauzzen. But Rory's caught in a deadly game on Gorgoror, chased around the ruined moon in a sort of blood sport.

I think one of the best things about this TARDIS crew is that their levity allows writers to explore darker territory without risking an overly-morbid tone. It's the same with the Fourth Doctor – his alien cheek and charm make *Image of the Fendahl*, *The Robots of Death*, and *Genesis of the Daleks* enjoyable. Make no mistake: *Hunter's Moon* is sinister, but it's a very compelling story too, complete with a few smart references to TV adventures. We even see Aggedor (*The Curse of Peladon*; *The Monster of Peladon*) again, albeit briefly!

Touched by an Angel

The Weeping Angels. Hooked?

The moving statues are made for television; by their very nature, they're visual creatures, moving in the darkness. So how would they translate to the book format? Brilliantly, as it turns out. Yes, the Angels are scary, but they're made more terrifying by our imaginations. Jonathan's Morris' novel gives us a number of brilliantly-memorable scenes that use the aliens' premise perfectly.

Touched by an Angel starts with the death of Rebecca Whitaker, killed in a car crash. Mark, her husband, is then victim of the Weeping Angels, sent back in time – and determined to stop the untimely death of the woman he loves. Neat idea, right? It's a

truly touching tale that sees the Doctor, Amy, and Rory up against the odds.

Morris adds a lot to the Angels' mythos, making this an essential read if you're a fan of Steven Moffat's most famous monsters; but most interestingly, it contradicts *The Angels Take Manhattan* (which was, in fairness, written the year after *Touched by an Angel*).

If you consider both canon – and I do – it opens up a lot of possibilities for the Angels. Are they at different stages in their evolution? Or are there numerous sects with different abilities...?

Big Bang Generation

Since 1992's *Love and War*, there's been a character that fandom's fallen in love with. Professor Bernice Summerfield. She appeared in many Virgin New Adventures and New Adventures titles, *Short Trips*, novellas, and in 1998, made her transition to audio, courtesy of Big Finish, played by the wonderful Lisa Bowerman.

Big Bang Generation is the first time she's met an incarnation of the Doctor from the 2005- present series.

As Peter Capaldi is such a big fan of *Doctor Who*, it seems fitting Bernice returns alongside him. This middle story of *The Glamour Chronicles* trilogy is a lovely addition to Summerfield's story and it's really great to have her back, with a new Doctor to be sarcastic with.

Big Bang Generation is written by Gary Russell, so you know you're in safe hands!

Cabriole

James Baldock



Timecheck: December 24th, 1988...

The thunderstorms had abated, and a low band of cloud hung over London. It was one of those evenings where the rain couldn't quite get started, dissolving in a slovenly, lacklustre mist that soaked and chilled the hurrying commuters marching across Leicester Square. Traffic and street lights gleamed and buzzed over the heads of well-heeled shoppers in headscarves and fur as they made their way to Marks & Spencer, looking for last-minute bargains; tourists sat hunched over sloppy fries and milkshakes in the harsh strip lights of Burger King; over at the entrance of the Hampshire, the doorman stamped his feet.

Bustling past the queues at the Empire - and turning a few heads - were a man and a woman who appeared to be late for a costume party. The man looked to be in his early forties, wearing a pompous (if determined) expression, and a tremendous, multi-coloured frock coat that looked like something you might get if you fed a scarlet macaw into a 3D printer. The woman had her curly red hair pulled up in an elaborate French plait that was in danger of losing its integrity in the breeze and the drizzle; she held a complimentary newspaper over her head, its pages flapping in a light south-westerly.

"I still don't understand why we couldn't have parked a little closer," she grumbled as they hurried over Charing Cross Road, the buses rumbling and honking past ticket touts and buskers. "It must be half a mile! It would have been quicker to take the Piccadilly!"

"You know the TARDIS," replied her friend. "She's not always good at short hops. Ask her to land on the skin of a volcano on the other side of the galaxy, she can manage it in a double heartbeat. Try and get her from Hounslow to Central London, and - well." He shrugged. "You might as well don a blindfold and put a pin in a map."

“So you say,” replied Mel. “Sometimes I think you don’t know how to fly her.”

“Melanie! I am officially affronted.” The Doctor had stopped and puffed out his chest, but it was clearly an act. “I’ll have you know that I —”

“Is there any chance you could have me know in the warm, please? This dress is chiffon and it’s not exactly helping my circulation.”

“Come along, then.” The Doctor offered her his arm. “And do try and enjoy the atmosphere. It’s Christmas Eve!”

She sighed. “At least you got the date right.”

The Georgian exterior of The Royal Opera House towered above them as they walked along Floral Street. Elegant multi-floored terraces gave way to shabbier buildings with crumbling brickwork, seemingly at odds with the imposing Grecian facade that lay on the corner, all columns and sculptures and balustrades. A foundation stone denoted a visit by the Prince of Wales; at their left were restaurants, offices, and the nondescript entrance to the Royal Ballet School, in which young men and women toiled for years, enduring pain and humiliation, in order to earn the right to do their limbering on the other side of the road.

All of a sudden, the Doctor stopped. He had detected movement coming out of a nearby alley: a flicker of movement, and then a rustling.

“Just a second, Mel,” he said. “There’s something - or someone - in there.”

Mel glanced at the alley, then at the bright lights of the theatre building. “Do we really have time?”

“Yes, if we’re quick. Come on, it won’t take a moment.”

“Hmm. I’ve heard that before.”

They walked into the alley, which was dark and soaked with rain. Behind a dirt-smeared Grundon stood a man who was either half-rat, or a rat who had evolved into something not quite human. Straggly hair dangled from his face, straddling a set of bad teeth. His combover was greasy and lice-ridden. His jeans were ripped, tucked into cracked leather boots; beneath a thin denim jacket he wore a vest that might once have been white.

He smiled. “Evening sir. *Madame.*” He greeted Mel with a theatrical bow.

The Doctor frowned. He had approached the alley in the belief that someone might need his help, but he was starting to wonder whether it had been a bad idea.

“You look like you’ve an eye for a bargain,” the stranger went on. “Interested in adding a little sparkle to your evening?”

The Doctor put his hands on his hips. “Now look, young man, if you’re asking us if we wish to dabble in recreational narcotics — ”

“No! No, nothing like *that!*” The rat-faced man shook his head with vehement force; the Doctor saw something small and black fall out and scuttle away. “I meant — well, look. Let me show you.”

He pulled out a large black trunk from behind the bin, and undid the catch. The box opened to reveal a stack of colourful tubes, of assorted sizes but all decorated with patterns and logos, with pointed ends and strings dangling from the bottom.

Mel peered down at the display. “Fireworks?”

“Best in London.” The rat-faced man looked quite proud of his collection. “All category 3 and 4. Got your candles, got your fan slices, got your SIBs. Guaranteed to make any party go with a bang, geddit?”

The Doctor looked at him suspiciously. “Are those strictly legal?”

“Sir!” The rat-faced man put a hand to his heart and his eyes went wide. “I would inform you that these are the finest and safest recreational fireworks this side of Northwood! ”

“Yes,” said Mel, “and I suppose that’s why you’re selling them out of a suitcase in the middle of a dark alley.”

It was the rat-faced man’s turn to look suspicious.

“Hold on,” he said. “You’re not with the law, are you? Crikey, that’d be just my luck, Christmas Eve of all nights.”

“No, we’re not,” snapped the Doctor. “But nor are we interested in your under-the-counter shenanigans. I came down here in the mistaken belief that someone might be in need of assistance, not because I was looking for illegal entertainment courtesy of the great unwashed!”

The rat-faced man looked as if he might be about to cry.

“Come on, have a heart,” he said. “It’s tough enough making a living in Maggie’s England without folks giving you a hard time about it. I’m just a bloke tryin’ to feed his kids, ain’t I?”

He dabbed at a moistened eye with a grubby hand. The Doctor looked away, whistling under his breath.

Mel sighed, and opened her purse. “Here,” she said. “We’ll take a five metre fountain and a double heart set piece.”

She handed over a wad of cash: the rat-faced man’s mouth dropped to sea level.

“Strewth,” he said. “Thanks very much.”

“Just one condition,” said Mel. “Find an honest job.” And she tucked the fireworks into her handbag and strode into the light.

“I suppose,” the Doctor remarked, a little huffily, “there will come a point where you’ll tell me about the money, and just how you got it.”

They were strolling through the plush interior of the Royal Opera House, high ceilings and grand, sweeping stairs, a snake of people waiting at the cloakroom hatch. There was a buzz in the air, but it carried a strain of boredom, of anticipation tarnished with mute expectancy. It was as if people knew exactly what was about to happen and how it should take place.

When no reply was forthcoming, the Doctor probed a little further. “Well? Anything?”

Melanie had her eye on a display dedicated to Natalia Makarova, but now she turned her attention back to the Doctor. “Do you remember that drug dealer we encountered in Stoke?”

The Doctor’s brow furrowed. “No.”

“The one who was part mongoose? With the Sontaran security detail?”

He shook his head. “No, I can’t say it rings a bell.”

“Oh, you remember. The hallucinogenic ice creams. And the windmill made of rubber. You know. We met Robbie, the teenager who you said was going to be a pop star. And Prius the drug baron tied me to that sail. With the flames.”

“Hmm...”

“Come on! We beat him with cress.” Mel stopped to think. “Or was it chess? You know. There was that clueless detective who had a limp. And the local W.I. Do you really not remember any of this?” She looked at him, exasperated. “You were wearing your blue coat.”

“Oh,” said the Doctor. “*That* one.”

Mel threw up her hands. “Finally! Anyway, he left his safe open. So I emptied it.”

“What on earth for??!?”

“It’s just you never know when you’re going to need money. Particularly in a tight spot. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned about travelling with you, Doctor, it’s that you don’t usually have it.”

“I got us these tickets, didn’t I?”

“And I’m very grateful.” Melanie’s voice softened, and she touched the Doctor’s forearm. “The Nutcracker on Christmas Eve, performed by the Royal Ballet. It’s a real treat.”

“I’m sure it will be splendid,” said the Doctor. “There really is no time like Christmas to enjoy a bit of Tchaikovsky. Even if the second act is always a bit dull.”

“Dull? It’s got all the memorable dances!”

“And no story.”

“Oh, don’t be such a stick-in-the-mud.” They had reached a tired-looking bathroom, the signs scratched and in need of retouching. “Would you mind waiting here for me? Just for a minute. I have to use the ladies’.”

She disappeared behind a cream door, leaving the Time Lord to his own devices. He gazed around the crowded corridor, scanning it for signs of trouble. Not that he was necessarily anticipating trouble, but... well, it did have a knack for following him round. And then there was the Other Thing, the thing he hadn’t told her. With a bit of luck, his suspicions would be unfounded, but while the Doctor had hoped for a quiet, incident-free night out, a little culture and class to see in the festive season, he also knew that his reputation preceded him.

Still. At the moment, everything seemed as normal as it could get. Ushers stood in low-arched doorways, examining printed tickets and showing people to their seats, selling programmes, politely requesting the extinguishing of cigars. The queue at the bar snaked along one side of the corridor as people ordered Martinis and Babycham and white wine. Two young women wandered past a sizeable wall poster advertising the production, giggling at its inset photo of the muscled young man playing the prince. Above his vested torso were a set of words: A BRAND NEW VISION FOR A CLASSIC SHOW.

The Doctor examined the promotional poster. And frowned.

The frown was on the verge of forming into a full-blown thought, but the Doctor knew he would need to pace a little to give it the momentum it needed. He turned away from the display and inadvertently collided with a stocky, well-dressed gentleman in evening dress, with nut-brown hair and a fierce expression.

“Oh!” said the Doctor, with a glimmer of recognition. “Excuse me — ”

The other man glowered, looked as if he were about to say something, and then stomped away up the corridor.

“Someone you know?” said Mel, who had just emerged from the bathroom.

“Mm-hmm.” The Doctor looked thoughtful. “I think I’ve run into him once or twice before. Important man at the BBC. Michael something.”

“Oh,” observed Melanie. “He doesn’t seem to like you very much.”

“Yes, well. I daresay he has his reasons.”

The bell had rung, and the patrons were taking their seats, shuffling with coats and stowing handbags, balancing full glasses and fumbling with tickets. In the pit, the orchestra tuned, while reeds were swapped and trombone valves unclogged: over at the back, the percussionist idly thumbed through a pornographic magazine. The Doctor glanced around him, looking from stage to wings to fire door. Over in row F, he could hear the clamouring of raised voices: an argument over seat allocation had broken out.

“You’re jumpy as a jackrabbit,” tutted Mel. “What on earth is the matter?”

“There’s something not right,” said the Doctor. “Something off.”

She put down her programme. “What do you mean?”

He took the programme from her and leafed through it. “This. This, right *here*. Have you seen it?”

Mel peered over to look. “What, this? About the robots?”

“Precisely! Just listen. ‘Thanks to groundbreaking new innovations we are pleased to introduce a brand new feature to this year’s production - a fully automated robotic ensemble, allowing the tin soldiers to move as you’ve never seen them move before. Turns, marches, and stomps - thrill as the timeless music of Tchaikovsky is matched with the marvels of modern technology.’”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

“For one thing it’s a dreadful cliché. For another, I really don’t think any good will come of using robots in *The Nutcracker*.”

“Why not?” Mel shrugged. “If it makes it more fun to watch, where’s the harm?”

“I travelled with a robot once,” muttered the Doctor. “And it didn’t end well. It never does.”

Melanie opened her mouth to say something, but was silenced by the dimming of the lights.

The orchestra struck up the cheerful B flat allegro of *The Nutcracker*’s overture, the strings caressing the melody - the second viola, the Doctor noted, was a trifle flat - and then the curtains opened on an elaborate set, a bright and cheerful Christmas tree stage right, laden with gifts, glistening in the spotlight, while a window opened on a painted snowscape. And then here came the dancers, elegantly pointed feet thudding over boards, disengaging and crossing and pivoting with mazurkas and jetés.

Goodness, they were *loud*. It was funny, the Doctor mused inwardly. One always thought of ballet as an elegant and silent thing. Elegant this might have been, but silent it was certainly not.

As Clara and Fritz made their entrance, the Doctor turned his attention back to the viola player. He appeared to have tightened his E string. Thank heavens.

It was all going splendidly until the end of the first act.

They had watched the opening scenes - the dressing of the tree, the dancers swooping and whirling with tinsel and baubles in a manner that was visually impressive but which would undoubtedly broach a hundred health and safety rules; then the arrival of the children, the lifelike human dolls and their stiff-jointed bows; the argument over the nutcracker, and then the chimes of midnight - or not quite, as Drosselmeyer lingered at the top of the clock, holding its peal at bay for just long enough for the tree to rise up out of the stage to reveal new greenery and freshly-painted baubles that appeared to be giant-sized. It was an effective bit of stagecraft, if a little primitive.

The young woman playing Clara dashed and darted among the stage, taking in the spectacle. It really was difficult, he decided, to effectively communicate something like this through the medium of dance. How is one supposed to act out the sensation of being shrunk without emoting it verbally? The Doctor recalled a time he had faced off against an oversized cat, after an accident with the TARDIS rendered his crew the size of insects. At least they'd still been able to speak.

Clara. Why was that name somehow familiar...?

He put it out of his mind. Ah: here came the tin soldiers, waddling across the floor to join their prince, while the mouse king lingered stage left, changement with the occasional grand battement, his rapier firmly in hand.

The Doctor had a good look at them through a pair of opera glasses he'd acquired in the foyer. They looked harmless enough. Each stood at a firm six foot five (the hats, he noted, added several inches), in full regimental dress uniform. The eyes were black and opaque, like polished onyx, and the mouths were horizontal slits prised open like the jaws of enormous nutcrackers.

They waddled onto the stage, looking more amusing than formidable, eliciting a laugh from the audience. Then they gathered in formation behind the nutcracker prince, forming a tight line. The Doctor was still peering through the opera glasses, examining the metalwork for familiar insignias or signs of trouble.

But he was coming up empty. The robot men bobbed and swayed in the manner of

curtseying policemen, which got another laugh. And they really *were* robots: he could see that from the stiffness of their gait and the absolute synchronisation of their movements. Either that or the ballet company had hired some incredibly talented human performers and dressed them up as robots, which meant they were guilty of false advertising.

“It’s uncanny,” the Doctor muttered. “They really are entirely automated.”

“Well, why’s that a bad thing?” whispered Mel, fiercely. “Perhaps it’s just someone who’s really good with electronics.”

“Yes, but — ”

“Shhh!” came a curt rebuke from just behind, and the Doctor shut up.

The Mouse King performed jeté elancés across the stage. He had abandoned his rapier, for the sake of the dance: presumably he would engage the prince in hand-to-hand combat. Behind him, the mouse army lingered: a baker’s dozen in furry costumes and masks, ready for the battle.

The Mouse King was twenty feet away when the soldiers all turned, as one, and blasted a dozen beams of energy in his direction.

He only just ducked in time. Fortunate, too, were the mouse dancers, who were upstage, thus evading the force of impact by a literal whisker.

The prince looked startled. This clearly wasn’t a flashy pyrotechnic. The Mouse King, too, was down on his knees, and then scrabbling out of the way in a manner that was almost ironically mouselike, as the robots wheeled round for another blast. Their quarry’s movements had placed him at the front of the stage, which was coincidentally where the prince happened to be.

The robots had their arms up. Both men were directly in their line of fire, with nowhere to go, frozen like rabbits.

Or mice.

There was a pause.

That was when the Doctor shouted, “You blithering idiots! *Jump!*”

The robots’ blast seared harmlessly over the heads of the prince and the Mouse King, who had dived off the stage and into the orchestra pit. There was a crash and the sound of splintered wood, along with some light cursing and an agonised groan.

Mel winced. “That sounded career-ending.”

The stage was suddenly empty of humans. The mice had scattered to the wings, joined by Clara - who had hidden behind an oversized gift the moment the fracas had begun. Only the robots remained, and having no one left on set to fire upon, they made a forty-five

degree right turn, so they were facing the audience.

Every single eye glowed a bright, brilliant green.

“Oh dear,” said Mel.

It would have been reasonable to assume, at this point, that the audience were in a state of panic and disarray, falling over each other in a futile attempt to make a swift and orderly exit. There would have been pushing and stumbling and the squashing of handbags. Instead, every person in the theatre sat, rooted to the spot. Some were too terrified to move. Others were convinced that this was all a part of the performance, a new level of immersion. Still others sensed they were at risk of death or maiming, but they weren't about to rise out of their seats. They'd paid through the nose for these tickets, dammit.

The arms of the robots went up.

“Doctor — ” began Mel.

But the Doctor already had his hand in the air. It was aimed at a small, red, glass-mounted panel on the wall, some yards away. With a high-pitched whine, the glass shattered, and the wailing klaxon of the fire alarm spread through the building.

That did it. More or less. It did for most people, who clambered out of their seats faster than you could say ‘1812’ and made for the nearest exit, although not without stopping to collect their coats, hats, and personal belongings in the manner most unbecoming of sensible people responding to a fire alarm. There was a scrambling and a jostling and more than a few people fell over, splayed on the floor of the auditorium looking undignified and cross. Still, the Doctor's ruse had worked: the exeunt had the net result of confusing the robots, who suddenly didn't know where to shoot.

Until they worked out that they should probably be shooting at him.

The Doctor threw himself to the floor and began to crawl along row F toward the aisle, as energy beams blasted the seats above his head. The upholstery was scorched and blackened and riddled with holes, but mercifully it did not burst into flames. As he was crawling, the Doctor considered what sort of beam would do that sort of damage, in the hope that it might

<shuffle, shuffle>

help him narrow down his options a little. If a plan was to be formulated, he really needed to know precisely what sort of enemy he was actually facing.

Somehow, he reached the end of the row, and made a mad dash along the theatre's

edge, ducking and diving and weaving and ignoring (or trying to ignore) the pulses that threatened to obliterate him, and then ran out through the door, and then headed for the sound booth.

When he got there, a terrified looking man was cowering against the far wall, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible whilst being too terrified to actually leave. His whole body quivered like a Scooby Doo character confronting a ghost. The hands oscillated rapidly, nails chewed to ribbons.

On seeing the Doctor he momentarily panicked, and then regained a small amount of composure when he realised he wasn't one of the robots.

"A simple job! That's what they told me! Just turn 'em on and let them go!"

The Doctor surveyed him. "Who are you?"

"Name's Gerald. I'm running tech. Was, anyway. 'Til this!"

"Where's everyone else?"

"They legged it. Me, I'm not taking my chances. Not when those *things* are out there!"

"I take it you were in charge of the robots?"

"I plugged 'em in. That's all! They came pre-packaged."

"From where?"

"No idea. It was the producer's thing. He got 'em off... some bloke he knew, offered him a deal, think there might have been a brown envelope, promise of a new video recorder. Someone might have slept with someone's wife. I dunno. All sorts of stories doing the ro—"

"You're waffling," snapped the Doctor.

"Right, yeah. Anyways, they were all set up, programmed to come out and do a bit of marching, back, forth, leave the stage. The dancers were supposed to do the rest. It was a gimmick, a bit of publicity for the tech company." Gerald clutched at his hands. "They worked fine in rehearsal!"

Instinctively, the Doctor trusted him. People who were hiding things didn't usually sweat quite this much. He peered out at the stage. The robot nutcrackers were alone on the stage, aiming their guns around the empty theatre.

"Are they still out there?" enquired Gerald, presumably too terrified to look for himself.

"Yes," said the Doctor. "I think we're safe in here, just as long as we — "

He ducked as a bolt of energy flew over his head, smacking into the glass behind.

"They're coming," he said. "Stay out of sight. We've got a minute at most."

Gerald's eyes were wide with fright. "What are you gonna do?!?"

"I just need..." the Doctor was fiddling with the mixing desk, throwing switches up and down. "If I can work out their frequency and then isolate the feedback loop at 250 Hertz, then it might — just *might* — "

They could hear the shudder of clanking metal as the robots made their way across the floor in their direction. Gerald had flattened himself against the far wall, behind a cupboard.

The Doctor cranked up faders three and four and then made a micro-adjustment to the gain. "Just... about..." He flinched again as another bolt seared in their direction, vapourising a pot plant.

"Here!" The Doctor switched from input to output and a high, pulsing noise reverberated across the theatre. Gerald plugged his ears. The Doctor shook his head, as if dislodging a fly.

There was the sound of a *fizz* from outside. Cautiously, the Doctor peered out of the doorway and beheld two of the robots, downed and still, having caught the brunt of the sonic blast. The others were heading away, lurching and swaying and licking their wounds.

He'd deal with them later. Right now, he had other fish to fry.

The Doctor went to a telephone at the nearby desk, dialled a set of numbers he'd memorised, gave a password and some instructions, and hung up. Then he made his way over to one of the downed robots and ran his hands over the metal, searching for pulse emitters, power generators, or any signs of off-world technology. He found nothing obvious. This equipment, it seemed, had been made on Earth.

But why? And for what purpose, other than to terrify a crowd of theatregoers?

The Doctor pulled open a shoulder panel, examining the circuit boards. Processor, visual optic link — ah. There. That was it.

He was just piecing together the last bits of the puzzle when he was joined by Melanie, who came trotting across the stage, heels clacking on its wooden surface.

"Everybody's out," she said. "Well, except me, of course. Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Unharméd," the Doctor said. "And more to the point, I think I've worked out what's going on with these rogue nutcrackers."

"Great," said Mel. "But there's another problem."

"Oh dear," said the Doctor. "Which is?"

"We managed to get the audience out through the main entrance and onto Bow Street. But the robots haven't gone that way."

“Yes, but isn’t that a good thing?”

“No,” said Mel. “They crashed through the stage door and went south. They’re headed straight for Covent Garden.”

The mayhem looked to be a couple of hundred yards ahead, around a corner. Specifically it *sounded*, rather than looked. They could hear screaming, and the occasional crash.

“So they’re not aliens?” said Mel, as they jogged.

“Not at all,” said the Doctor. “I had assumed we were dealing with a nest of Autons. Some primitive Cyber-variant. Even a Quark. But no, these were manufactured on Earth. I couldn’t be sure until I found the Awareness Chip.”

“The *what?*”

“It’s an algorithmic learning machine,” he explained. “It responds to user-generated feedback and is able to adapt its responses accordingly. Basically it uses human input as a kind of fertiliser, from which it’s able to grow other things.”

“So it creates new content from the user?”

“Precisely. The technology won’t really take off until about thirty years from now, but there were some primitive prototypes knocking around in this time period. The robots must have been fitted with one of those.”

“But I thought they were just carrying out a series of commands.”

“No, they were programmed to watch what was happening and then react. To respond to the narrative. At some point, they must have decided they didn’t like the story.”

“Isn’t that a little dangerous? Self-programming robots in a live show?”

“Well, theoretically, once you have a sequence you’re happy with, you lock it in. As far as I can see, they managed to find an override.” The Doctor sighed, which was a feat when you were keeping up a steady jog and indulging in a juicy helping of technobabble. “Artificial intelligence. Sooner or later, it always seems to find a way to see humanity as redundant.”

“But they’ve got lasers!”

“Yes, and they should be harmless. Designed for decorative purposes, like a cat toy. Only they’ve found a way to concentrate the beam.”

“How on earth did they do that?”

“I’ll ex--”

“Don’t tell me. You’ll explain later. So it was all a mistake? Rather than a nefarious plot?”

“Precisely,” the Doctor confirmed. “Although I think you’ll find that I’m the only one allowed to use words like ‘nefarious’ in this partnership. In any case, once all this is over, assuming we survive, you and I are going to pay a visit to that startup company and ask them exactly what they think they’re playing at.”

“At least it’s different,” said Mel. “I thought you were going to tear off the tech operator’s false beard and find out he was the Master.”

“I’m glad I didn’t,” said the Doctor. “That really would have been mind-numbingly predictable.”

Covent Garden was resplendent: the open-air market was serving overpriced mulled cider and hot pies, dangling icicle displays hung from the canopies, multicoloured rope lights swayed between lamp posts in the evening wind, and the tree outside the pavement cafe shone with baubles, glistening through a mile of tinsel. A violinist played Christmas carols by the jewellers, street peddlers were flogging discount Santa hats and illuminated candy canes, and the Seventh-day Adventists were thrusting pamphlets into the gloved hands of passers-by before trying to engage them in conversation about the reason for the season, and would they consider making a donation to help repair the leaky church roof?

At least that had been the scene five minutes ago. Now the tree had been upended, the market had hastily rammed down its shutters, the lights were in flames, and the Seventh-day Adventists had mercifully done a runner.

The robots were marking time in the square when the Doctor and Mel arrived. A crowd of people were in the process of a hurried and untidy exit, as the metal monstrosities crunched and stomped across the concrete, aiming their lasers and letting off the occasional beam. One met its target, and a middle-aged woman in a fur hat was instantly vapourised.

“What are we going to do?” cried Mel. “They’re going to kill everybody!”

“Not if we stop them first.”

“You know, if I had access to a computer with a modem and an ethernet cable, I bet I could reprogramme them from that junction box.”

“I’m sure you could, but we don’t,” said the Doctor. He was taking in the environment, performing an on-the-spot SWOT analysis: scanning it for threats, weaknesses and opportunities; middle management without the annoying flowcharts. His eyes moved from the market stalls to the phone box to the drains and back again.

"You know," he said, turning to Mel. "I do have an idea. But we need to get them all onto that platform. The one near the gratin dauphinois stall."

"I think I could do that," she replied.

"How?"

She beamed. "By adding another chapter to the story."

A light dawned in the Doctor's eyes as he understood. "All right. But *be careful!* And be ready for my instructions."

As Melanie advanced in the direction of the robots, the Doctor made his way over to *La Grande Bouffe* - a substantial marquee selling sizzling sausages and fried potatoes that were cooked in enormous pans - and then nipped round the back. The staff were long gone, their wares still sizzling hot and making for a likely fire hazard, but he couldn't worry about that now. The radio blared jaunty Irish-tinted Christmas music from a nearby speaker:

*"You're a bum, you're a punk, you're an old slut on junk,
Lying there almost dead on that drip in that bed,
You scumbag, you maggot, you cheap lousy f—"*

There was abrupt silence as the Doctor yanked out the generator cable.

He looked out from behind the stall. Where was Mel?

She hadn't been idle. As soon as the Doctor had dashed up to the platform she'd headed in the direction of the robots, who were using the square as a literal stomping ground: lurching like a group of drunken squaddies on their night out. The enormous jaws clamped open and shut and the arms reached out and grabbed at fistfuls of apples, or chunks of masonry. Then the jaws clamped shut again and great metal teeth reduced the masonry to smithereens.

It would have almost been comedic, had it not been so deadly. And it was only a matter of time before they managed to get their hands on a human appendage.

Mel reached a spot where there were no people. Then she turned to the robots and waved.

"Coo-ee!" she called out. "Fancy a bit of a dance?"

A few of the nutcracker soldiers pivoted in her direction: a perfect ninety degree turn.

Mel countered it with one of her own. Before they knew what was happening, she was re-enacting the first act of *The Nutcracker*, making up the steps as she went along.

Before her travels with the Doctor, Mel had carved out a respectable (if not exactly distinguished) career as a computer programmer. However, in her girlhood she had harboured secret unresolved dreams of becoming a ballet dancer, the same way that many children do; she'd had lessons and done local shows and even entered the odd competition. Her parents had indulged her, because while it was statistically unlikely that she'd become a star, they were happy to lend their support until she realised it for herself. Melanie, it would turn out, would have a career in cyber: she just didn't know it yet.

Still, the knowledge remained. As did the technique. To use a well-worn cliché, it was like riding a bike.

She performed chassés and sissonnes. Pas de basques. Petit jetés. And en tournant.

Astoundingly, it was working. The robots ceased their directionless rampage and turned their collective attention to the dancer in the middle of the square, tracking her movements and assessing her as a clear and present danger, to to be dealt with as a priority. And then they set off in her direction, jaws creaking, arms blasting out the occasional bolts.

Melanie avoided them all. And now she was adjusting her trajectory, moving up the access ramp - built to accommodate buggies and wheelchairs - that led to a central platform, near the abandoned potato stall and a smaller marquee selling wooden figurines.

There were several nutcrackers among them. As she careered around the space in an elaborate saut de basques, she tried not to think about the irony.

The robots were up on the stand now, and were surrounding her. They had decided to abandon their laser arms, out of tactical concern for hitting each other: instead the jaws were open, the arms outstretched, and they were looming in towards her. There was a gap between the nearest two: she prayed it would be wide enough.

Any second —

“Melanie!” cried a familiar voice. “Jump!”

She threw herself into the air and over the edge, landing in a perfect grand jeté en tournant on the ground three feet below. The robots turned in her direction, and that was when the Doctor rammed the sparking generator cable onto the floor.

A floor which happened to be made of aluminium.

Several thousand volts of electricity passed along the cable and into every robot there. The Doctor, who knew what he was doing, was unharmed.

The robots were juddering and swaying and sparking; the tops of hats blew off and the eyes changed from yellow to green to red and then colourless and blank. Fur singed. The jaws dropped, slackened and wavering on their hinges.

Then every robot fell to the ground, incapacitated and silent.

The Doctor climbed down the scaffold on which he'd been perched, and made his way across, extending an arm to help his companion to her feet.

"Well done, Mel," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Mel was dusting herself off: her gown had accumulated a little grime from the street. "There's a stretch in one or two of the seams, but all things considered it could have been much worse."

"Such a strange turn of phrase, that," the Doctor mused, largely to himself. "'All things considered'. How exactly does one consider *all things*? It's impossible!" He turned his attention back to Mel. "I must say, my dear, I'm impressed that you managed to perform those aerobic feats while wearing *that*."

"I did think about ripping it off to reveal some skintight lycra," she said. "But I thought it was a bit of a cliché. Not to mention it's rather objectifying."

"Didn't you do that on the Pink Windmill?" said the Doctor, and Melanie gave him a look.

There was a scuffle from nearby, and a well-dressed couple emerged from behind a toy duck sideshow, looking a little like a pair of guilty teenagers caught in the act. The man was in his forties and wore a dark suit and tie; the woman was some ten years younger, a heap of dark curls perched on top of a bright red, off-the-shoulder jersey.

Mel gave a start. "I *love* your hair," she remarked.

"Thanks," the woman beamed. "I love yours."

"What on earth were you two doing back there?" the Doctor asked. "I thought everyone had gone."

"We were... having a bit of a row," the man explained. "We didn't even hear the commotion until it was too late, and so we just hid."

The Doctor was stroking his chin, filing through the photo catalogue in his head, trying to place them. "Hang on a minute," he said. "Aren't you — "

There was a violent *SMASH!* as the duck stand lost one of its corners.

A single robot was lumbering through. The Doctor whipped his head to the left and counted. Of course. They were one short. How could he have been so —

"Doctor!" said Mel. "Got a plan?"

“We can’t use the cable again,” said the Doctor. They were backing away, slowly; the Doctor had manoeuvred the terrified arguing couple so that the robot would have to come through him to get to them, but he knew he’d be defenceless against that mouth, and the arms looked strong enough to lift two hundred pounds without breaking a sweat.

Well, metaphorically at least. The Doctor looked at Mel, ten feet away, then at the robot, which seemed to be advancing on her. Frantically, she looked over at the Doctor -- and then she looked down at her handbag, which he was carrying.

There was a moment of mutual realisation. The Doctor reached in his pockets and fumbled. Yo-yo. Jelly babies. Romanian passport.

“Doctor! Hurry up!”

There it was. He grabbed at the book of matches and threw it to her. Then opened the bag and withdrew a large cylindrical object.

“Catch!”

Mel did. The robot was very close, but she already had a flame going. She used it to light the tail of the firework, and then threw it into the robot’s glistening mouth.

“Here,” she said. “Crack *that*.”

Instinctively the metal jaws clamped shut, and then there was a violent explosion somewhere within its circuitry.

The lights went out, steam came out of its ears, and one arm dropped off. The robot juddered three times. Then it crashed to the floor.

When she was sure it was safe, Mel came out from behind the balloon stand. She was joined by the Doctor.

“That was a little too close for comfort,” he said. “It’s lucky we had that firework.”

Melanie nodded, and then surveyed the devastation around her. “So what happens next?”

“Well, I took the liberty of putting in a quick call when I was in the control room. The cavalry should be here right about... Ah, here they are.”

A military truck had rolled into the square, and armed soldiers were disembarking, controlling and dispersing the crowd, sending medical staff to check the wounded. Mel recognised one or two of them.

“UNIT?” she said.

“In the flesh,” confirmed the Doctor. “The funny thing is, when I checked the records, it

turns out there never was a Nutcracker performance here in December 1988.”

“What was on the programme for Christmas Eve?”

“Nothing. At least nothing I could find. But this particular production has been expunged from the records. It doesn’t exist.”

“And you think UNIT has something to do with that?”

“Let’s just say they’re good at covering things up,” said the Doctor. “Except their supposedly hidden location. That’s the worst kept secret in British intelligence.”

“You knew about this, didn’t you?” said Mel, with the sort of hard stare that would have impressed Paddington Bear. “That’s why you got the tickets. You knew something was up.”

He shrugged. “I had a hunch.”

She pulled on her gloves. “Then I shall start calling you Quasimodo.”

There was a cough from nearby. The couple they’d saved were still there, mercifully unharmed.

“That’s twice you’ve saved our lives,” said the man. “We’re very grateful, although I rather hope you don’t have to do it again.”

“The feeling is mutual,” said the Doctor. “By the way, I’m the Doctor, and this is Melanie. We never did get your names.”

They looked almost amused. “I’m Sarah,” said the woman. “And this is my husband, Andrew. He’s a composer.”

“I see. Anyway, it’s time we were heading off,” said the Doctor. “I left the TARDIS in a decent enough area, but it’s Christmas Eve, and I’m very anxious to get back before the revellers descend from the pub.”

“Surely they can’t do that much damage?” said Mel. “Old thing like that.”

“Yes, well, just as long as it hasn’t been spray painted…”

They walked away. Sarah let out a long breath — one she hadn’t even realised she’d been holding — and then turned to her husband. “My *God*, Andrew. That outfit!”

“It was a bit of a disaster, wasn’t it?” he remarked. “Like something Malevich might have produced if he’d picked up a needle instead of a paintbrush.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Mind you.” Andrew brushed down his overcoat. “It’s got me wondering. Joseph really is due for a revival, don’t you think?”

“Definitely.”

“I should make some calls.”

“At least leave it until January, won’t you?”

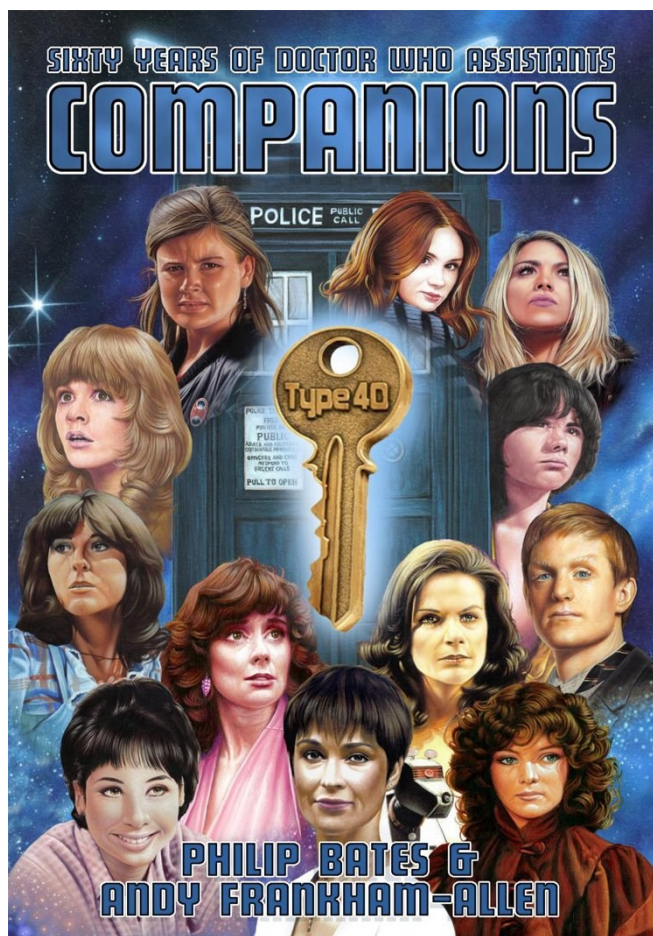
“Fine.”

They walked away, two souls in a sea of millions, as peace and serenity descended. Or as close as you ever got to it round here. This was London, after all.

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**Merry Christmas to all,
And to all, a good-night... !**



