Tempo

A hero for all ages, 'Dr. Who' is just out of this world

By Clarence Petersen

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HO IS THIS fellow with the Harpo Marx grin, the seven-color 15-foot knitted scarf, the Edwardian coat and the 10-gallon fedora?

Who is this fellow in whose breast beat two hearts, who adorns to 700 years of age, who travels through time and space in a London police call box to battle the forces of evil, invariably keeping his head when all about him are losing theirs?

Yes, Who, Dr. Who, that is. He is all of those things, and lately he has become a focus of a cult known as Who-ites.

Who-ites represent none of the perils to American youth that parents associate with the Unification Church or Hari Krishna. Who-ites do not spirit away impressionable teenagers, brainwash them and hide them from their parents.

Who-ites functionally as little except those who went before the television set (at 11 p.m. Sundays) and watch reruns of reruns of the 15-year-old BBC science-fiction series, "Dr. Who," which debuted on Chicago's WPFW-CH 11 in 1973.

Some Who-ites also collect "Dr. Who" comic books and paperback novelizations, listen to "Dr. Who" records, play "Dr. Who" board games, wear "Dr. Who" T-shirts, drink "Dr. Who" coffee mugs, knit "Dr. Who" scarves, toss "Dr. Who" Frisbees and test their memories with "Dr. Who" trivia quizzes.

Although the first American Who-ites were discovered in Los Angeles, they are believed to be more numerous in Chicago. No one has taken a census, but television ratings indicate nearly 100,000 of them watch the series every week.

Chicago's Dr. Who Fan Club, a correspondence club operated by Cynthia Guido of 2970 N. Sheridan Rd., has more than 200 members.

As a Result, Chicago has attracted the attention of the North American Dr. Who Appreciation Society, formed in Van Nuys, Calif., as the official branch of the British Dr. Who fan club. The second annual Dr. Who convention will be held Friday through Sunday at Chicago's Americana Congress Hotel, 555 S. Michigan Ave.

The Dr. Who convention will be part of the seventh annual Chicago Comicon (comic convention), which last year attracted 7,000 one-day admissions, said Larry Charet of Larry's Book Store, 123 W. Devon Ave., who organized both conventions. Largely because of Who-ite events, advance admissions this year ($3 each day) are running well ahead of 1973.

It takes an extraordinary man to attract such devotion, and, indeed, Dr. Who is extraordinary even among spacemen.

A Time Lord, one of an elite group of scholars from the planet Gallifrey in a galaxy beyond the reach of today's most sophisticated telescopes, Dr. Who transports himself from period to period, place to place, adventure to adventure in a remarkable vehicle called a Tardis. He acquired the Tardis years ago while it was in London for repairs, and it has since retained its original form as a police call box.

Dr. Who, in contrast, has changed appearance five times since 1963. William Hartnell originated the title role; Patrick Troughton took over in 1966, Jon Pertwee in 1970, Tom Baker in 1974 and Peter Davison (costar of "All Creatures Great and Small") last fall. Americans have seen only the Pertwee and Baker episodes. They will get their first look at some Davison episodes at the convention.

Over the years, Dr. Who has traveled with an assortment of companions: Leela, the alien warrior, Romana, the brainy organ, whom Dr. Who insists on calling simply Romana; "It's either that or Fred, 'he tells her; A K-2, the computerized wonder dog, and, in the episodes currently being aired, Sarah Jane Smith, a beautiful English journalist (played by Elisabeth Sladen, who will attend the convention together with producer John Nathan-Turner and writer Terry Nation); and Harry Sullivan (Ian Marter), a naval doctor who in some episodes is bright and capable and in others something of a nerd. Despite their diverse planetary origins, they all speak with Earthly English accents.

Dr. Who carries an odd assortment of tools in his pockets, including a sonar screwdriver, handy for getting into locked buildings and spacecraft and for dismantling enemy hardware. He also carries a Yo-Yo, useful, he explains, with a sheepish grin, for taking gravity readings. "Dr. Who" is not a series that takes itself too seriously.

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a megalomaniac scientist, Davros (played by the hysterical hit by Michael Wisher), a man of whom it can be truly said that if only he had turned his evil genius to... ah... niceness—well, the mind boggles.

DAVROS DEVELOPED the Daleks to conquer the universe in the course of a thousand-years war between the Thal and Kaled races on the planet Skaro. Dr. Who is dispatched from future time to alter the Daleks' capacity for destruction. At one point, he has a chance to annihilate them, but he balks.

"Do I have the right?" he says as he prepares to detonate a ton of explosives in a room full of grishly mutant blobs.

"Simply touch one wire against the other and that's it—the Daleks cease to exist. Hundreds of millions of people, thousands of generations, can live without fear in peace and never even know the word Dalek... But if I kill, wipe out a whole intelligent life form, then I become like them—I'd be no better than the Daleks."

Fortunately, Dr. Who's anguished philosophical debate is interrupted by the news that Davros has agreed to reprogram the Daleks. Unfortunately, it turns out that Davros was just kidding [heh, heh, heh], and by the end of the episode, Dr. Who has succeeded only in slightly altering the Daleks, slowing their evolution, he admits, only a few thousand years.

"You don't seem too disappointed," says the wide-eyed Sarah, as she and Drs. Who and Sullivan prepare to depart the planet. "We've failed—haven't we?"

Doctor's scarf is a real stitch

HERE ARE the official British Broadcasting Corp. directions for knitting a "Dr. Who" scarf:

Materials: Size 4 [American size 10] knitting needles; 26 25-gm balls of double knitting [American worsted weight] wool in the following colors: 3 purple, 6 camel, 3 bronze, 3 mustard, 4 rust, 3 gray and 4 greenish brown.

Directions: Using purple yarn, cast on 60 stitches. In plain knitting [garter stitch], always slip the first stitch in each row. Knit rows in the following order: 8 purple, 52 camel, 16 bronze, 10 mustard, 22 rust, 8 purple, 20 greenish brown, 8 mustard, 28 camel, 14 rust, 8 bronze, 10 purple, 42 green, 8 mustard, 16 gray, 8 rust, 54 camel, 10 purple, 12 green, 8 mustard, 18 rust, 8 purple, 38 bronze, 10 camel, 8 gray, 40 rust, 14 mustard, 20 green, 8 purple, 42 camel, 12 bronze, 20 gray, 8 rust, 12 purple, 6 camel, 54 green, 16 rust, 12 gray, 8 mustard, 20 bronze, 10 purple, 12 camel, 32 gray, 10 rust and 16 mustard.

The tassels at each end of the scarf are made of 1-foot lengths of wool, using all seven colors.

The BBC, which licenses all "Dr. Who" merchandise, warns that the finished scarf is to be worn, not sold.

"Failed?" says Dr. Who, grandly. "No. Not really. You see, I know that although the Daleks can create havoc and destruction for millions of years, I know also that out of their evil must come something good."

VIEWERS ARE spared an elaboration of that dubious Hegelian proposition, and it's just as well. After all, the universe could have been spared the Daleks and Dr. Who spared his dilemma attendant to their destruction had he merely traveled a bit further back in time and destroyed Davros before he created his monsters.

But that would add elements of the abortion debate to Hegel's dialectics, and taken together, it's pretty heavy stuff for a television series originally intended for children.

Until Baker, a protege of Laurence Olivier, took the Dr. Who role, the series had few adult viewers and was seen in 30-minute episodes, each ending with a cliffhanger, at 6:30 p.m. weekdays.

It was played tongue-in-cheek by Baker's predecessors, too, but only in the last two years, said Larry Charet, who has sold Dr. Who paraphernalia for five years, has it become an adult attraction.

George Brio, who operates the New Fantasy Shop at 5651 W. Belmont Ave., agrees. "Tom Baker gave the Doctor a lot of character," he said. "He added a lot of idiosyncrasies, quirks and gadgets."

Charet and Brio have since been joined as Dr. Who merchandisers by at least two other bookstores, Park West Books, 2430 N. Lincoln Ave., and Notoriety, 1611 Chicago Ave., Evanston.

WTW officials react to the "Dr. Who" phenomenon with a combination of satisfaction and dismay. "I've been here three months," Richard Turner, director of publicity, said recently, "and every time I go to a cocktail party, all anyone wants to talk about is 'Dr. Who.'" Sylvia Waywood, an eight-year WTW veteran, draws a finger across her forehead. "I've had it up to here with 'Dr. Who,'" she said.

NONE OF which surprises Bernard Beck, associate professor of sociology at Northwestern University. Science fiction, with its frequent conventions and network of clubs and societies, Beck suggests, has filled a social vacuum bequeathed by the 1970s.

"It's just another example of the way life is being filled," said Beck, who has reviewed George ("Star Wars") Lucas' films for sociological journals such as Society. "Social life is no longer conventionally or institutionally organized by neighborhoods or large families."

"The height of modernism is to make a lie about interests shared in common with other people. Science fiction is the sort of thing that literate people are not ashamed anymore to claim as lightweight entertainment, and conventions are a major alternative to singles bars."

Not surprisingly, though, the ubiquitous Dr. Who is not unknown in the singles bars, where the "Dr. Who Theme" has been heard as a disco hit and the jukebox has offered a new wave band called the Daleks.