

**Inside the Tardis: the worlds of Doctor Who**

JAMES CHAPMAN

London, I.B. Tauris, 2013 (revised and expanded)

vii+416 pp., appendices, notes, bibliography and index, \$105.00 (cloth), \$19.00 (paper)

**New Dimensions of Doctor Who: adventures in space, time and television**

MATT HILLS (Ed.)

London, I.B. Tauris, 2013

vii+240 pp., further reading, \$25.00 (paper)

**Who is Who? The Philosophy of Doctor Who**

KEVIN S. DECKER

London, I.B. Tauris, 2013

ix+256 pp., notes, bibliography and index, \$25.00 (paper)

*Doctor Who* has developed a massive fan following ever since its debut 50 years ago (1953), but even though many people have loved the show for half a century, and the series' popularity has exploded in recent years, scholarly criticism and analysis of *Doctor Who* has been sparse. In the wake of the general celebration over the first half-century of the show, several works have been released to explore untold stories connected to the series. The three books discussed here, James Chapman's *Inside the Tardis: the worlds of Doctor Who*, the anthology *New Dimensions of Doctor Who: adventures in space, time and television*, edited by Matt Hills, and Kevin S. Decker's *Who is Who? The Philosophy of Doctor Who* all attempt to make up for the absence of critical literature regarding this worldwide television phenomenon. All of these books have been published by I.B. Tauris, which deserves credit and thanks for its contributions to *Doctor Who* scholarship. The former is completely successful, the latter two mostly so.

Though all three books discuss the same television series, they each approach the show from an entirely different angle. *Inside the Tardis* is a history of the first 50 years of the series and its spin-offs, providing analysis and commentary of the series' most famous and controversial moments, as well as behind-the-scenes details of *Doctor Who* that even die-hard fans might not know. *New Dimensions of Doctor Who*, consisting of 11 essays by different writers, focuses on a wide variety of topics. The subjects range from technical and creative aspects of the show to how the series has sparked its own industries and moved far beyond the television screen. *Who is Who?* explores the philosophical structure of the series and critiques how the Doctor's actions and decisions reflect the ideas of prominent philosophers.

Of the three books discussed here, the best and also the most readable is Chapman's. *Inside the Tardis* is an essential reference work for anybody who wants to understand the factual background of *Doctor Who*, as well as the creative development of the series. Readers should be aware that this is not a visual history. Copyright issues probably are behind the absence of photographs in the book—this history of *Doctor Who* is entirely textual. The recent paperback edition reviewed here has been updated from the original 2006 version to include more information

about 'New *Who*,' or the Davies and Moffat eras of the series that brought the show back from the obscurity of cancellation.

All television series evolve over time, and long-running television shows with revolving casts change more dramatically than most. *Inside the Tardis* is always interesting and readable, and Chapman has wisely decided to divide the book into chapters that reflect the various 'eras' in the series, not just dividing each chapter by each Doctor's tenure, but also by the ever-changing showrunners and creative teams, illustrating the importance of the often-overlooked figures behind the camera. In most cases, each chapter covers the career of a single actor's portrayal of the doctor, though the Sixth and Seventh Doctors share a chapter, and the long-serving Tom Baker's Fourth Doctor receives two chapters reflecting different tonal approaches to the material: 'High Gothic' and 'High Camp,' illustrating the turn towards goofy self-parody that the series took over the course of Baker's tenure, a trend that would be halted in the Peter Davidson era.

Chapman notes that most of the aspects of *Doctor Who* have fluctuated dramatically over the years. The series' mythology was not fully formed in 1963, and early goals of being an educational series soon gave way to being popular entertainment, which eventually became a cult niche series as the audience dwindled, and then a fading memory before reaching unprecedented blockbuster status after the revival. Chapman does an excellent job explaining the studio politics and creative debates that spurred changes in the series, as well as creating a better understanding of the details behind the scenes that took it into unexpected directions.

The one shortcoming of *Inside the Tardis* is its inconsistent critical perspective. The vast majority of the book is neutral in tone as it describes the changing actors and creative teams behind the series, but here and there Chapman steps out from behind his veneer of objectivity to provide some comments on why certain moments in the series were either superlative or lacking. At times, the perspective can be one-sided, such as when he discusses fan derision towards David Tennant's final line and extended farewells, ignoring the fans who absolutely loved the callbacks and emotion in the popular Doctor's last moments (p. 234). The chapter on the spin-off *Torchwood* defends the series against the critics who disliked *Torchwood's* heavy sexual overtones but this defense is lacking in detail—it's a controversial subject and ought to be either discussed at length or merely briefly acknowledged, and if Chapman defends the show's take on sexual themes, more is needed. Notably, the series' biggest controversy, the portrayal of a pedophile as (in many viewers' opinions) as sympathetic and even heroic, is largely ignored. For the most part, Chapman limits his personal critical perspective to a brief sentence here and there on what constitutes the best moments of *Doctor Who* and which episodes fell short.

Ultimately, *Inside the Tardis* serves as a brilliant factual history of *Doctor Who* (and its spin-offs *Torchwood* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures*), though not as much as an insightful critical analysis. Comparatively, *New Dimensions of Doctor Who* is full of essays that cover both critical analysis and factual information about the series and its expanding influence in the real world.

The essays in *New Dimensions of Doctor Who* are all insightful, but there is a major disconnect between the style of most of these essays and the television show they analyze. Most of the essays are formal and scholarly, a radical difference in tone from the exciting and frequently whimsical series that they are supposed to

be celebrating. The show, particularly the recent series, is action-packed and full of humor, but there is precious little of those high spirits and wit in these essays. Many of the essays are rather dry in tone, and unlike *Inside the Tardis*, which makes the off-screen drama come alive, most of *New Dimensions of Doctor Who* is nowhere near as entertaining as watching the actual show.

That is not to say that *New Dimensions of Doctor Who* does not provide plenty of trivia that will fans will happily take to heart. Technical aspects of the show and its musical score are recounted in David Butler's 'A Good Score Goes to War: Multiculturalism, Monsters and Music in New *Doctor Who*.' The enthusiastic people who interact and make the series a hit are analyzed in Rebecca Williams's 'Tweeting the TARDIS: Interaction, Liveness, and Social Media in *Doctor Who* Fandom.' Different ways of celebrating the show are shown in Matt Hills's 'Anniversary Adventures in Space and Time: The Changing Faces of *Doctor Who*'s Commemoration.' These are just samples of the diverse subjects covered in this volume.

While the topics of study are all interesting, sometimes the execution of the essays does not fulfill the expectations inspired by the premise. Unfortunately, a few of the essays are rather dull and sprinkle about postmodernist buzzwords to signify erudition. The best essays provide new understandings into the creations of aliens and other aspects of the *Doctor Who* universe, or help to understand how fandom has spawned tourist industries and additional entertainments. These essays all try to illustrate how *Doctor Who* can be the subject of serious study, but it is the essays that capture a bit of the series' whimsical spark that make the best reading.

Decker takes on some of the heavy topics, yet addresses them in a consistently readable manner, though students with a background in philosophy may feel compelled to debate or at least add to some of his conclusions. *Who is Who?* is more for students of philosophy than it is for readers looking for background information about the series. Readers who are not familiar with Heidegger or Spinoza (among others) are bound to be a bit nonplussed at times. At times it seems that Decker is namedropping some of the most famous names in philosophy, and finding situations in the series that allow him to name-check these pivotal intellectual figures. Anybody who knows the general work and theories of these authors will be able to read these passages effortlessly, but people without this necessary background knowledge may at times feel adrift because Decker often only provides minimal information about some philosophers and the logic behind their beliefs.

Decker recognizes that the ever-changing series does not have a single solid, coherent philosophical outlook or approach to problems and situations. It is one of the unique charms of *Doctor Who* that the central character's personality changes whenever there is a change in actors. Every actor who takes on the role brings on a new perspective to the role, and the new Doctor's attitudes may be as different from his predecessor as his clothing. Decker places special emphasis on how the various iterations of the Doctor have varied approaches to life and moral issues in his chapter 'Not the Man He Was: Regenerating the Doctor' (p. 132).

In another chapter, 'We All Depend On the Beast Below: The Monstrous Other,' Decker explores some of the alien beings that the Doctor goes up against in his travels (p. 77). Many of the Doctor's enemies commit acts of cruelty and

violence out of twisted principles, but it is important to remember that not all of the Doctor's antagonists are innately evil. Many of them are simply misunderstood, or acting out of honorable motives that lead to undesired or unanticipated consequences. Decker raises some excellent points that *Doctor Who* subtly emphasizes—just because some character is the viewers' hero, that does not mean that the hero always does the right thing, and just because someone goes against the hero, that does not make that character the villain.

The philosophical underpinnings Decker reveals highlight the show's often-overlooked intellectual and emotional richness, as these serious considerations illustrate how *Doctor Who* is more than just a frivolous entertainment. *Doctor Who* has always been about more than a voyage through space and time, it is also an exploration of morality and the consequences that actions bring. Though some passages, such as Decker's frequent equations of the Doctor's actions with existentialism, may raise eyebrows of dissent or confusion, for the most part Decker's work is a spirited attempt to explore the higher themes of the series, without falling into the trap of austere and humorless writing that marred some of the less enjoyable articles in *New Dimensions of Doctor Who*.

In the months since these books were released, new episodes of *Doctor Who* have actually served to leave two of the books outdated. *Who is Who?* notes the affect of the Time War on the characters of the Ninth and Tenth doctors, but the 50th anniversary special *The Time of the Doctor* has turned everything fans thought they knew about that catastrophic event on its head. It seems quite possible that later editions of *Inside the Tardis* will contain new work reflecting the end of the Smith era and the upcoming Capaldi era.

Not surprisingly, fans of *Doctor Who* will probably be the main audience for these books. The frequent references to crucial plot points in these books, particularly *Inside the Tardis* and *Who is Who?* might make one wish that River Song were around to warn readers with a curt 'Spoilers!' Indeed, those who read Decker's and Chapman's books should be forewarned that they are filled with spoilers. However, these spoilers are crucial for an intelligent discussion of the show, so the authors cannot be faulted for these plot revelations. In Decker's case, it helps to be familiar with the episodes being discussed, and on occasion a reader unfamiliar with the episode (or even unacquainted with a particular Doctor being discussed) is likely to feel a little lost.

There are some fans who only like the 'Classic *Who*' and others whose affections are limited solely to the 'New *Who*.' These three books reach out for fans of both, though *New Dimensions of Doctor Who*'s focus is primarily on the recent seasons. None of these three books has been written for an audience that is unfamiliar with the series, but all of these books serve to enrich the understanding of people who enjoy the series and wish to understand more about it besides what they can find on the television screen.

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