WHO NEEDS THE DOCTOR?
How Karen Gillan went from sexy sidekick to super siren

GUEST EDITED BY LILY ALLEN AND SARAH OWEN

PIRATES IN TOTTENHAM
A radio revolution

'WHY I ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A HOUSEWIFE'
Lily's domestic goddess guide

Karen Gillan photographed by Nicole Nodland
Girls want to be her, designers want to dress her and men want to undress her, but Karen Gillan is keeping her feet on planet Earth. Here she models this autumn's vintage trends with a couple of devoted clones.
Karen Gillan's powers extend beyond being able to thwart aliens and grapple with the theories of time travel. She is an idol to teenage girls, an object of desire to male Whovians and an exemplar of fashion muse, courted by designers and the makers of luxury handbags, and considered only marginally less influential than fellow celebrity clotheshorses Alexa Chung and the Duchess of Cambridge.

That Karen has entered the national consciousness so completely seems astonishing when you consider that only two years ago she was an unknown actress from Inverness, working in a South London pub and doing a spot of modelling to subsidise her career. But then Steven Moffat came knocking and selected her to be Matt Smith's companion, Amy Pond, in his rebooted Doctor Who.

Her first appearance, as a police officer kissogram dressed in the shortest skirt the Tardis has ever witnessed, ensured her life would never be the same again.

Karen, who at 23 is the same age as her on-screen alter ego, happily takes full responsibility for the skirt that sent so many sci-fi fans into an interdimensional spin. 'They kept trying to put me in various denim ensembles. And I was like, "No, no, no. It has to be a short skirt, because that is what girls my age wear." And when I wore that skirt, I felt like Amy.' As if to prove a point, today she is wearing an equally short black Lycra mini and a pink woollen jumper sewn with tiny pearls, booty from one of her many trips to the vintage clothing emporia of Brick Lane. "Amy is basically the person I want to be," she explains. "I just don't have her sassy attitude. But I like that about her, and I like that about other people. I am attracted to people who are mouthy and brave and adventurous."

Karen has always been nerve-racked by the prospect of performance. An only child, she was raised by her mother Marie, a science-fiction fan, and her father John, a care-home manager, who taught his daughter chess and took her to charity shops every weekend hunting for classic vinyl, instilling in her a passion for Elvis Presley and Nina Simone. John is a seasoned pub open-mic performer (‘like karaoke, but a bit more serious’) and Karen, who was not academic, initially considered a career as a musician. ‘I played the piano from a really young age and I was thinking about doing something with performance and music, and that introduced me to acting. I had always struggled with nerves so it was quite difficult for me.’ She left home at 16 to go to drama school in Edinburgh, and came to London aged 17, living on the Old Kent Road with a group of fellow drama students and studying at the Italia Conti school until she dropped out for a role in a production of ITV’s Scottish detective series Rebus. A couple of fallow years followed and then, drama. Who and the universal adulation, the intensive filming schedules in Cardiff and the merchandise – Karen’s new flat in Kennington is filled with Amy Pond dolls, still in their original packaging.

The second half of the latest series of Doctor Who has just started and sees Amy coming to terms with the revelation that River Song, played with sassy relish by Alex Kingston, is actually her daughter, something Karen was understandably ‘shell-shocked’ to discover. She is signed up for another series after this one, which will please the serious fans, who have generally been reduced to a state of adoration by Karen’s performance, although there was some dismay at the hint of romantic attraction between the Doctor and his companion (Whovians just cannot conceive of a Doctor with those sort of urges). As in the show, in real life Karen and Matt Smith are great friends, going to gigs together and his tone of Brian for over five years. ‘Matt and I do stay in character a lot when we’re filming, without ever realising it. The lines blur; the way we interact in real life is sometimes a lot like the way we interact in the show. To be honest, a lot of the time we act like lunatics, dancing, keeping the energy up. The show is high-octane, and I am quite hyper anyway.’ As with all intense collaborative efforts, it sounds like the Doctor Who team play as hard as they work (the schedule is Eleven’s filming one out of every 14 days and stories of high jinks have leaked out, such as the night when Karen was discovered drunk and naked in the hallways of New York hotel. She giggles when asked about this, but will not elaborate.

Back home in London, she likes to spend her weekends shopping for vintage clothes. ‘It’s one of my favourite hobbies. I start at the top of Brick Lane and work my way down and always have us out by the time I get to the bottom.’ On Saturday evenings she goes to gigs and ‘talks to randoms’. Her favourite new bands are Mother Mother and Everything Everything. She loves antiques, esoterica and the gothic. Her favourite film is What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? and she would like to play Lady Macbeth, ‘also from Inverness’, and Elizabeth Bathory, a 16th-century Hungarian countess. ‘She was like a vampire, she killed people.’

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