Q&A GRAEUME BURK AND ROBERT SMITH?

Authors Graeme Burk and Robert Smith? have given Doctor Who fans two books on their favourite subject.

50 ways to love Doctor Who

Why this book?

Graeme: During the time we were interacting with fans after the publication of our first book, Who is the Doctor, we were constantly asked, “What episodes should I watch?” in this 50th anniversary year, there’s a real hunger for Doctor Who and its rich history, but the question is how do you make 50 years of television history accessible?

Robert: We think that Doctor Who is the greatest show on television! But there’s so much of it and some of it is missing, so we wanted to provide an easy way for people to get into the show.

From 1963 to 1966, William Hartnell (1908-1975) was the first to star as TV’s Doctor Who. Seen here in 1965, Hartnell tickles two co-stars playing Telfow, bald mutated humans employed in Space Security.

Acton Jon Pertwee (1919-1996) was the face of Doctor Who from 1970 to 1974. He played the Doctor in 18 episodes over three seasons, and the first to introduce the concept of the TARDIS as a time machine. Pertwee was a master of the comedic delivery, earning him the nickname of “The Joke Doctor.”

The Doctor?

Graeme: I grew up in Oakville, Ont., and was watching TV in Buffalo. I was home sick and my sister left the TV on. At 6 p.m., the Doctor Who came on. It was the second episode of the Tom Baker story Pyramids of Mars and I loved it.

Robert: I was five years old and I saw Jon Pertwee’s Doctor fighting off a giant fly. I never looked back.

Why did that happen?

Graeme: I was 16 and it just pressed all the buttons of all the things I loved: it was funny, witty, the drama was pitched right and it was really, really imaginative.

Robert: My father had been a fan of William Hartnell, who played the first Doctor. So he was watching Doctor Who for old times’ sake. I thought the idea of giant maggots hatching into a giant fly was the most exciting thing imaginable. I kind of still think that.

Why has this show endured? To some it might seem hokey.

Graeme: I chalked it up to the notion that it was hokey at all. It’s about a guy who goes through time and space in a time machine disguised as a telephone booth that’s bigger on the inside. Who uses humour, wit and intelligence to solve problems. And wins out against monsters in dark places. That’s not hokey, that’s frankly awesome. It was budgetarily constricted, particularly in the 1970s, but frankly so was the bulk of British television at the time. It’s a bold, imaginative show that’s about, as Craig Ferguson put it: “The triumph of intellect and romance over brute force and cynicism.” That sounds like a mission statement I can get behind. That’s why it’s endured I think.

Robert: The secret to Doctor Who is its ability to diversify. Each week, you don’t know what type of story you’re going to get. A comedy? A space opera? A horror story? It can appeal to a wide audience across an enormous range of tastes. And the secret to the show’s longevity is its ability to regenerate: every few years, the show tosses out everything that’s working and starts again, both in form and in content.

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Doctor Who: Like weather

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Doctor Who is like the weather; it’s endlessly discussable and if you don’t like what’s happening right now, something else will be along shortly.

Who is your favourite Doctor?
Graeme: Tom Baker. And when Tom is busy, David Tennant. And when they’re both on holiday, Peter Davison. Tom Baker because he made the Doctor alien just by being detached. He has a way of looking at the world at a 45-degree tilt from the rest of us. I love his eccentricity. Tennant because he did some of that but also made the Doctor human and accessible and made those emotions seem larger than life. Davison because he’s an amazing actor.

Robert: One does not simply “have” a favourite Doctor. I don’t have a favourite sibling either. The different incarnations of the Doctor are all fascinating facets of a central personality. It’s possible to enjoy Tom Baker’s alien-ness, Matt Smith’s whimsy and Christopher Eccleston’s darkness all at once.

Favourite episode?
Graeme: The first episode I saw in 1984, Pyramids of Mars (from 1976). It was beautifully evocative and imaginative. It’s a story set on a country estate in Edwardian England where the Doctor is trying to repel an Egyptian demi-god with robot mummies. It’s a mad, bold premise but it works because everything exists within the desperate reality of trying to stop this threat from destroying the universe and the acting is not played for laughs, it’s played for real, and it has all these very ordinary details, which makes the horror of it stand out all the more.

Robert: My favourite is probably 1988’s Remembrance of the Daleks. It deconstructs the very essence of Doctor Who, taking the show apart to see what makes it tick, and asking difficult moral questions of the audience ... while nevertheless being a rip-roaring adventure with sharp dialogue and witty byplay.

Do you think it will continue on?
Graeme: The second Doctor, Patrick Troughton, once said he thought the reason the show was so successful was that babies keep on being born. And I kind of agree with it. It’s supremely entertaining and always enthralling.

Robert: I think the 2005 revival of Doctor Who has shown that the series is immortal. It may not always remain a television show, but it will continue in some form or other, so long as there are stories to be told. And even if the show falters, then, in a generation’s time, some kid who’s watching it now will grow up to be a TV producer and be in the right place at the right time to bring it back.

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