

# The wisdom of youth

Doctor Who Saturday 8.20pm BBC1

She's in *Game of Thrones*, *Doctor Who* and has a million Twitter followers. At just 18, Maisie Williams is fighting for change...

**M**AISIE WILLIAMS IS 18 years old now, but young – young in a way you've never been. Effortlessly, expansively, relentlessly young, despite a career spent growing up fast. The actress is best known as Arya Stark in *Game of Thrones*, her first ever role. A child in an incredibly adult series, Arya has been watched by fans growing from tomboy into assassin. Williams is now appearing in *Doctor Who* as Ashildr, a Viking child facing down an entire alien invasion – and the Doctor himself.

Why does Williams – the youngest of four siblings, and born two weeks before Tony Blair came to power – only play bad-asses?

"Well, strong female characters, I like to say."

But surely not every strong female will run you through with a sword?

"They're people that make decisions; I don't mean the murderous side of it. They're real women, and not just an idea of how a woman is or an accessory."

Coming off the *Who* set in Cardiff, she's still in costume, a jerkin and leather boots that make her look like a Lost Boy from *Peter Pan*. She is attentive and intelligent, but has a fidgety energy. Before auditioning for *Game of Thrones*, aged 12, she moved from Somerset to attend Bath Dance College and now, in a dreary backroom, she's always in motion: tucking her legs under her, teasing out a strand of hair, managing her hands. You only know you've been boring when you say something interesting, and she locks eyes and somehow talks even faster. Suddenly she's nibbling quickly on a biscuit.

Williams isn't a woman who is going to compromise. She is taking on the future at full force.

Her old friends are now going off to university, her mother used to work in academia and her elder brother wants to be a lecturer, but Williams has never wanted to go into higher education. Nevertheless, *Game of Thrones* has only a few series left to go – a graduation of sorts – and like most people her age, Williams is considering her future. She sees no reason to let her standards slip.

"I didn't realise when I was younger that women were written so badly," she says, "but going further into this career I realised there are a lot of really bad characters, that it's not common to come across females who aren't just 'the girlfriend'."

It's a discussion that has extended to the



**'I hope to never have to play a character that is only there to benefit a male lead'**



#### GIRL WARRIOR

In *Doctor Who*, Williams plays Ashildr the Viking to Peter Capaldi's Time Lord. Above, as tomboy Arya in *Game of Thrones*

set of *Doctor Who*, with Williams seeking out departing companion Jenna Coleman for advice. At the age of 29, Coleman is an old hand in the business.

"Me and Jenna were talking about it," Williams explains. "When you get a script they always include a sentence or two about the character, something like 'Jason: 36, strong, built, quick, witty' and a description of his personality."

"Then there's his girlfriend – 'Sarah: hot, blonde.' And that's it! Hot-looking but in a cute way. That's your character!"

Williams is incredulous.

"You can't pick and choose everything, but I hope to never have to play a character that is only there to benefit a male lead."

It's a big claim for someone under pressure to keep up the momentum of her career, but sitting across from her, you can believe it. People keep describing Williams as "outspoken", a patronising word, like calling a child "precocious". Williams isn't outspoken; she says things, and there are one million people on Twitter who are willing to listen.

**W**HETHER THEY'RE FOLLOWING her because they're interested in her opinions or are just fans of *Game of Thrones* is irrelevant. "Either way I've been given a voice and I want to try and do something with it. The young generation are very passionate, it's just that not very many of us are given a voice, and every time we are we're shut down by people who think we don't know anything."

She believes that, far from being lazy, the reason young people are disconnected from politics is because they're under so much pressure to score highly, go to university and "do something good with ourselves".

There follows a breathless, statistic-citing discussion, weighing the pros and cons of voting in general elections. "I think even if you don't want to vote," she decides, "you should go and spoil your ballot..."

Being an "outspoken" young woman has always been dangerous, but social media has only made it easier for misogynists and idiots to contact their targets. When Williams set up her Twitter account, her mum was given full access, but go and have a look at what >



◁ a vocal minority are saying about her right now. It's a horror show.

In *not being silenced*, Williams is every bit as brave as the characters she plays, like *Harry Potter* star Emma Watson before her. She has spoken about getting bullied at school, and starred in Channel 4's chilling *Cyberbully* in January. Yet despite knowing the risks, Williams clearly considers it her duty to keep speaking.

"No one taught me how to be a famous person! It's so scary, but it's what you have to do. I've stopped reading what people think now. It's easy for people to have an opinion online when they don't realise that there's actually Maisie Williams who's reading that and crying."

From one-dimensional roles to sexless role models, Williams believes people get angry the moment women stop conforming to type. She talks about how Miley Cyrus was pilloried for her sexy dancing, because it goes against her previous, Disney-friendly character, Hannah Montana. Cyrus, according to Williams, is simply trying to work out who she wants to be.

## 'I'm still trying to be a good role model. I do influence a lot of people'

But who does Williams want to be? "I'm still trying to be a good role model, because whether I like it or not I do influence a lot of people. But you only get 70 or 80 years on this world. Young people in this industry... we're doing all right! It's good to make mistakes; that's what this time is for. It's a bit different to when you accidentally text your mum instead of your boyfriend, but it's still exactly what all my friends are going through."

Watching her friends receive their exam results and go off to uni ("There is always a little lump in my throat. It's such an iconic day that they'll remember for ever, and I don't have that") has her considering her own future. Some would like that to be as the Doctor's new companion. Will she impress in her current stint on the show?

"I've never really had a plan, and it's worked out all right so far. At the moment I'm enjoying this industry and I don't want to stop any time soon. But I know I want to dance at some point, because that's what I've always wanted to do. Who knows what I'll be doing in 20 years... or five years? What if I've gone to university and I'm eating all my words?"

"I just want to be happy. That's honestly what I want to do."

Ah, youth. Remember that?

JONATHAN HOLMES



## WHO WILL BE THE NEW COMPANION?

After three years as plucky companion Clara Oswald, Jenna Coleman will leave *Doctor Who* later this season. So who will replace her? Here are five contenders...

### 1 MAISIE WILLIAMS

Given her breakout role as Arya Stark in *Game of Thrones*, Williams is one of *Doctor Who*'s most hyped guest stars. But could her appearance lead to a full-time role? It's a long shot. Williams is a big name – one whose career is just beginning. And *Doctor Who* is a huge time commitment when Hollywood is calling.

### 2 ZAWE ASHTON

If Channel 4's sitcom *Fresh Meat* is anything to go by, Ashton is the future of British drama – a talent who improves everything she's in. That includes *Doctor Who*, which she appeared in last year as Journey Blue, a soldier who begged the Doctor to take her with him. Could he have a change of hearts? Or might she be better suited to a role as the Doctor instead?



### 4 INGRID OLIVER

Alongside Faye Marsay, who was in the last Christmas special, Oliver is another fan favourite. Her character, Osgood, was blasted into dust – which, in *Doctor Who*, means we'll be seeing her again this series, reprising her role as a Unit scientist (and super-fan of the Doctor). Funny, clever, brave – she'd make a brilliant companion. If she doesn't turn out to be a Zygon, that is.



### 5 GEORGINA CAMPBELL

Who? Exactly. Did you know who Karen Gillan was before *Doctor Who*? What about Jenna Coleman, or Kylie Minogue? (OK, scratch that last one.) The point is that Campbell, who won a Bafta this year for BBC3's *Murdered by My Boyfriend*, is exactly the sort of up-and-coming talent that *Doctor Who* likes to nurture.

STEPHEN KELLY

### 3 MICHELLE KEEGAN

From the Cobblestones to the Daleks, the former *Coronation Street* actress is this year's bookies' favourite to replace Jenna Coleman (*Game of Thrones*' Rose Leslie was last year's). That makes sense. Coleman is an ex-soap star, too, having begun her TV career in *Emmerdale*. But with Keegan committed to the revival of BBC1 drama *Our Girl*, she might need a Tardis herself to find the time.

