There has been a Doctor Who comic strip for almost as long as there has been a Doctor Who television programme. Ever since William Hartnell's First Doctor took off in the TARDIS with his grandchildren John and Gillian in TV Comic in 1964, the Doctor's adventures have been as entertaining on the printed page as they have on TV. When the UK arm of Marvel Comics began their Doctor Who Weekly in 1979, the Doctor's comic strip adventures entered a new era of sophistication. The Weekly metamorphosed into the monthly Doctor Who Magazine (DWM) and Doctors Four, Five and Six all enjoyed a run of memorable adventures. Then, in 1987, Sylvester McCoy became the Doctor on television and a new era of classic Doctor Who comic strips began in earnest.

1987 was a new beginning for Doctor Who in more ways than one. Although the programme's long-serving producer John Nathan-Turner continued to oversee the show, he was to be joined by a new script editor - Canadian-raised Andrew Cartmel. Cartmel had been working for a computer company in Cambridge when the opportunity arose for him to work on the programme. He had previously attended workshops at the BBC Script Unit and had sent scripts to an agent who had agreed to take him on. This lead to a meeting with Nathan-Turner and Cartmel being offered the chance to join the Doctor Who team.

Cartmel was unashamedly a reader of comics. As he told the We Are Cult website in 2017, one of his biggest influences was unquestionably Alan Moore: 'I was a big fan of comics when I was working on the show. Or, more accurately, a big fan of Alan Moore's Swamp Thing and V for Vendetta. There were a few other creators whose work I read at the time... Frank Miller, Love & Rockets by the Hernandez Brothers and Howard Chaykin's American Flagg... but really, compared to Alan Moore they hardly existed.'

It is true Andrew Cartmel's Doctor Who episodes felt very much like a televisial comic strip. Many of the characters were larger than life, such as the villainous Chief Caretaker (Richard Briers) in Stephen Wyatt's Paradise Towers (1987) or the Thatcher-like Helen A (Sheila Hancock) in Graeme Curry's The Happiness Patrol (1988). Some of the Colin Baker television stories had been a little conservative in their approach, prompting many to comment that the programme was beginning to feel tired. But under Cartmel, the show became more experimental, displaying the imagination and innovation of the comic writers which Cartmel so admired.

After an unsteady first series for McCoy (the scripts having largely been written before the writers had a clear idea of what sort of character the Seventh Doctor would be) the programme's 25th anniversary season in 1988 saw Cartmel and his writing team really hit their stride. Stories such as Remembrance of the Daleks and Silver Nemesis hinted
that the Doctor may in fact have been much older than previous episodes had suggested and that he may have been a contemporary of the legendary Gallifreyan figures, Rassilon and Omega. This attempt to make the character more mysterious has become known as the Cartmel Masterplan. Alas, the Masterplan was to be cut short when the BBC axed the programme in 1989.

But all was not lost because the Seventh Doctor was already well established in the comic strip medium as he had been on television...

The first DWM Seventh Doctor comic strip, A Cold Day in Hell, written by Simon Furman and drawn by John Ridgway (November 1987 to February 1988), saw the return of the classic 1960s monsters, the Ice Warriors. It was a suitably traditional story with which to begin the new era and Ridgway (a veteran of the Sixth Doctor strips) faced the challenge of drawing the new Doctor before he had been properly seen on television.

Interviewed in the comics fanzine Eagle Flies Again in 2003, Ridgway recalled the process of depicting real life actors in comic strip form: "I found that copying faces from photographs was difficult at first, but having drawn a face a few times it started to become easier. The problem with trying to draw a comic around a known actor is that there are rarely photographs with the right expression, angle or writing... I can't honestly remember if I was short of references for Sylvester's face, but Sylvester has a face that is easily caricatured!"

The task of drawing the Doctor would become slightly easier from 1988 onwards due to the initiative of incoming DWM editor John Freeman who would oversee a huge chunk of the Seventh Doctor’s comic strip adventures. Visiting recording of Doctor Who on location, Freeman asked Sylvester McCoy to pose for reference photos for the comic artists - during shooting of The Greatest Show in the Galaxy in 1988 and again during a recording break in the sweltering heat of summer 1989 during the making of the final televised story of Doctor Who's classic run, Survival.

The McCoy strips quickly established themselves as an important part of DWM. And there was no shortage of top drawer contributors willing to participate, with writers such as Grant Morrison, Dan Abnett and Alan Grant and artists such as Geoff Senior and Kev Hopgood all working on the stories.

Some of the early Seventh Doctor strips were quite light in tone, reflecting the more humorous Season 24 persona of the Doctor. As the TV show became darker and more multi-layered, the comic strips followed suit. On TV, the Doctor had become Time's Champion, a master manipulator of cosmic events playing chess on an intergalactic scale, and this began to feed through to the strip.

A particular highlight came in the form of Nemesis of the Daleks (September to December 1989), an excellent story written by Steve Alan, featuring the return of the popular Abslom Daak character from the early Doctor Who Weekly. This was a very dark and moody story with some strong links to established television continuity and superb visual depictions of the Daleks by artist Lee Sullivan who had been a fan of the classic 'TV21' Dalek strips.

As noted above, the Doctor Who TV show came off the air in 1989. But the Seventh Doctor's future on the printed page was already assured. In much the way that comics had influenced the direction in which Cartmel steered the programme, the increased sophistication of the television episodes began to feed back into the strips.
The comic strip continued to follow the TV series' lead, further developing the Seventh Doctor's darker nature and the relationship between the Doctor and his companion Ace, and Cartmel himself joined the team of writers contributing to the strip. He was to be particularly pleased with his work on the story Evening's Empire, the first episode of which was published in DWM in 1993. Beautifully illustrated by Richard Piers Rayner, this was a classic story as Cartmel told We Are Cult: Evening's Empire was my most ambitious work and the one of which I was (and am) most proud. It was like a Seventh Doctor TV story but with an unlimited budget — and also slightly darker, more abstract and more adult.' He was also satisfied with The Good Soldier (pencils by Mike Collins and inks by Steve Pini, published July to October 1994). A Cyberman story I wrote, which I think was very good and made imaginative use of the possibilities of the Cybermen in a way I still don't think has been explored or achieved by the show.' Other established writers such as Paul Cornell and Marc Platt (writer of Ghost Light — the final Cartmel-edited Doctor Who TV story to be made) would also contribute to the strip. It was a classic era for Doctor Who in the comic strip medium.

The absence of new Doctor Who on television meant that Sylvester McCoy enjoyed a much longer run as the 'incumbent' comic strip Doctor than he might otherwise have done. He bowed out in the story Ground Zero in 1996. With the arrival of the Doctor Who TV movie starring Paul McGann, there was a new, Eighth Doctor to take up the baton.

In early 2018 came the news that an exciting new era for the Seventh Doctor comic strips was about to begin. Back in the editor's chair, John Freeman was to oversee a new mini-series of Seventh Doctor adventures published by Titan Comics, utilising characters created for the TV series by Ben Aaronovitch, written by Andrew Cartmel, with artwork provided by Christopher Jones. This new story, Operation Volcano, sees the Doctor and Ace once again meet up with Group Captain Ian Gilmore and other characters from Aaronovitch's classic 1988 television story Remembrance of the Daleks. With four superb variant covers for the first issue and a backup story written by Richard Dinnick and drawn by Jessica Martin, it's clear that fans of the Seventh Doctor have a lot to look forward to.

ComicScene UK catches up with John Freeman who, as editor of Doctor Who Magazine from 1988 to 1992, oversaw many of the Seventh Doctor comic strips...

How did the Andrew Cartmel script-edited TV episodes influence the direction of the comic strip?

I'm a lifelong fan of comics and Doctor Who and was determined the strip should remain an element of the Magazine, even though its production gobbled up a high proportion — nearly 50 per cent! — of the title's then (roughly) £2000 budget per issue. At that time, it was probably the only part of the title that could potentially be re-purposed in collections, something else I hoped we could achieve.

Every editor of the comic strip has their own approach to the strip and Richard Stankings, who was editing the strip before me, was genuinely inventive during his run, employing a huge range of creators, both writers and artists, including me. When I took over, I liked the variety of creators involved but I did feel though that we needed strips that in some ways brought the strip closer to the TV show in terms of styling (albeit with no effects budget limitations!) in an effort to have it resonate more with readers, which was the feedback I was getting from them, and from creators champing at the bit for a break, like Paul Cornell and Scott Gray.

When I met Andrew Cartmel at a Christmas party, he was keen to bring back the strip and he volunteered he'd like to write a strip. I almost bit his arm off. Having someone who was so integral to the show writing the strip gave it a legitimacy we'd never had before, and the Doctor Who strip had never had.

This is, I need to stress, by no means to dismiss the incredible work of anyone writing past strips — I love the Pertwee stories in Countdown and the strips such as 'The Iron Legion' which made Doctor Who Weekly a must buy when it launched in 1979, and Steve Parkhouse's scripts for the Fifth and Sixth Doctor, complemented by John Ridgway's art on the latter.

But from the point of view of publishing a title that was fighting for survival when he became editor, we needed to re-sell the Magazine to 'lost readers' so being able to sell the strip in to Diamond (who then solely distributed the title in the US as well as UK comic shops, and only used the strip to sell the title in, really) with a TV name attached certainly wouldn't hurt advance orders. Plus, from a creative point of view I really liked what the Seventh Doctor became in Season 25 and 26, and wanted more of the same for the strip. Who better to write some stories and give us a steer on how to 'direct' the character than one of the Seventh Doctor's principal architects?

How do you think the McCoy strips differed from the Colin Baker ones?

There were a lot more shorter stories, initially, with good reason I think. We genuinely feared for a while the title would be cancelled. No one wanted a story half-finished if that had happened, so epsics were out. That said, and you'd have to ask Richard Stankings for confirmation, some of the creators he com-