



Matt Smith, center, is the latest of 11 men to play Dr. Who.

The Doctor Is In

Why a 47-year-old English sci-fi show is suddenly an American hit
By James Parker

KNOCK KNOCK. WHO'S there? *Doctor* ... What, still? Again? Once more, with a bow tie on? Since 1963, this personage has been with us. Ten times he has regenerated. In 1989, his show went momentarily off the air, for 15 years. He has outlasted cancellations and cultural mutations, inadequate budgets, poor scheduling, shifting leagues of writers and producers, Krotons, Autons, and space wars across the universe. He has beaten the Daleks, his ancestral enemies—trundling pepperpots who have one arm in the form of a toilet plunger and the other an egg whisk, skeleton-raying their victims and crying “Exterminate!”

in a verminous, panicky rasp. And now, arguably, he's fitter and happier than ever, a prancing miracle of longevity. The premiere of his latest season, in April, was BBC America's most-watched show ever. Rumors come and go (oh, those rumors) of a guest appearance by Lady Gaga, or of a big-screen adaptation starring, perhaps, Johnny Depp. U.S. fandom is at a frothing height. Could they possibly have known what they were doing, the middle-class middle-England mid-management middlebrows of the BBC, when they sanctioned the creation of the character known as Doctor Who?

If you're not already acquainted, the Doctor is 950 years old, and he comes

from the planet Gallifrey. Although humanoid in form, he has two hearts and almost-celestial intelligence. He is a Time Lord—something between a cosmic guardian and a private investigator—and he travels the spaceways in his TARDIS (Time And Relative Dimensions In Space), a time machine that, owing to a dodgy chameleon circuit, is stalled in the shape of a 1950s London phone booth. He can do almost anything. Alien invasions of Earth, for example, are punctually thwarted, and in the new season he also plays a bit of soccer and makes friends with Vincent van Gogh.

“A frail old man lost in space and time”: that was the original profile,

floated in discussions at the BBC in 1963, as if the show's secret purpose was to dramatize senility. And indeed the first Doctor, played by William Hartnell, did seem somewhat cortically marooned, as he jolted around the black-and-white universe in his TARDIS. For one thing, the silver-haired Hartnell visibly had trouble remembering his lines, thus establishing by accident the doctorial convention of absentmindedness and preoccupation. He addressed his companion, Barbara, faintly, as "my dear" and "my child." (Historically, the Doctor's female companions have provided hormonal balance, pulchritude, combat support, screams of terror, and valuable relief from the doctorial patter, which has essentially been a decades-long soliloquy.) And when Hartnell's health failed after three years on the job, another fortunate accident was occasioned: it was decided that the Doctor should "regenerate," taking a different human form. Which he did, in 1966, assuming the form of Patrick Troughton.

Troughton (tragedian's face, flapping coattails) was post-psychedelic:

the show's producers, as revealed by recently released BBC memos, hoped to convey a state of metaphysical dishevelment comparable to the aftereffects of a bad acid trip. After Troughton came Jon Pertwee, wizzardly in aspect but driving a little yellow roadster, like Mr. Toad. And after Pertwee, there came ... well, I'll risk a roll call. There was Tom Baker, wild hair and Shakespearean elocution; affable Peter Davison in his cricket jersey; testy, priggish Colin Baker, dressed for some reason like an entertainer at a children's party; Sylvester McCoy, whom I never watched; and then handsome Paul McGann, the Doctor for one TV film only ... and then ... and then ... Viewership boomed and dwindled; artistic direction was lost, found again, lost again. But a tenacious fandom established itself, like a parasite clinging to the hull of a space cruiser. Flawed, changeable, the show had an *attraction*.

Everyone loves the theme tune. In good seasons and bad, there has always been the *Doctor Who* theme tune, potent beyond words, perhaps the greatest of them all. Composed in 1963 by

Ron Grainer, the score was handed over to the dreamers and techies of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, where a futurist named Delia Derbyshire did some serious time travel with it: oscillator banks, multitracking, filtered white noise, the works. ("Did I write that?" Grainer is said to have asked upon hearing the finished article. "Most of it," Derbyshire replied.) A galloping heavy-metal bass line preyed upon by E-minor zoomings of electronic melody, it sounds like a nervous breakdown in the middle of a flying-saucer attack. It sounds like Hawkwind performing Gustav Holst's "Mars, the Bringer of War." They've fiddled with it over the years, remixed and revisited it, but the buzz and menace of the original have never dimmed.


I find I must lapse into nostalgia. When I was a short-trousered schoolboy in the 1970s, my own Doctor was Tom Baker, and *Doctor Who* was more or less an out-of-body experience. Wedged into BBC1's Saturday-evening schedule at fish-sticks-and-ketchup time, it gave off dizzy wafts of the



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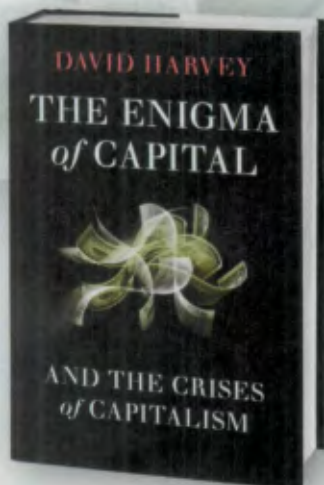
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uncanny. Before it, *The Basil Brush Show*, starring a glove-puppet fox in a cravat. After it, *The Generation Game*, hosted by Bruce Forsyth, an extraordinary old whippet of a song-and-dance man whose catchphrase was “Nice to see you, to see you ... nice!” In between, the thrumming, tunneling synth-beams of the Grainer/Derbyshire music, and the zappings, the disintegrations, the alien pomp ... It was English, so English. It reeked of old Albion. No wonder it faded away.

But then, in 2005, comes the Great Reboot, a mighty regenerative act by which *Doctor Who* is heaved into line with American standards. No more sets made out of cereal boxes and aluminum foil, no more waffling monologues and congealed fancies. Now it’s CGI, backchat, irony, long narrative arcs, and tighter-than-tight writing: a post-*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* world. The Doctor has not had a regular TV spot for 15 years, and there is something slightly vengeful in the swagger of his ninth incarnation. Christopher Eccleston—somber affect, jug ears, sudden mad-cap grin—wears a three-quarter-length black leather coat and speaks in a Lancashire accent. Importantly, while the sass and the structure are transatlantic, the iconography stays local. In “World War Three,” members of an intergalactic crime family called the Slitheen crash a UFO into Big Ben and then dress up in human bodysuits to infiltrate No. 10 Downing Street. These suits have a side effect: unstoppable, bass-toned flatulence. “I’m getting poisoned by the gas exchange,” groans one Slitheen after an exceptional outburst in an elevator. American sleekness, English aesthetics: the twin ray guns of the reloaded *Doctor Who*.

It’s a hit: cheering reviewers, big numbers, full steam ahead for the rebranded Doctor. Eccleston, however, quits after one season (for reasons never made clear), and so on Christmas Day 2005, the Doctor emerges from another regeneration. A slight, pale man in his pajamas steps forward. “WHO EXACTLY ARE YOU?” demands a nearby alien warlord. “See, that’s the thing,” says the man mildly. “I’m the Doctor, but beyond that, I just don’t know. I literally do not know who I am. It’s all untested.” Meet David Tennant, the 10th Doctor, who in

2008 will go on to play a fine and quivering Hamlet for the Royal Shakespeare Company. “Am I funny?” he continues, Prince of Denmark-style. “Am I sarcastic? Sexy? A right old misery? The life and soul? Right-handed, left-handed? A gambler, a fighter, a coward, a traitor, a liar, a nervous wreck?”

This is all meat and drink to the 21st-century viewer, who has no idea who *he* is either. We are now entering the era of post-secular television—of *Lost* and *Heroes*, of time loops, unearthly powers, chaotic entrances into parallel dimensions—and the Doctor and his wheezing sci-fi are, finally, bang up-to-date.

Fast-forward to 2010, and the whoopings of the TARDIS are heard in an English garden. The time machine has landed on its side, and its dripping pilot, clambering free, announces that the swimming pool has fallen into the library. Why is he here? Because a little girl has a crack in her bedroom wall, and through it she hears a Voice—a mechanized, totalitarian Voice—repeating, “*Prisoner Zero has escaped ... Prisoner Zero has escaped ...*” Meanwhile, 12 years into the future, the patients in the local coma ward are manifesting signs of hostile possession, and the Voice is broadcasting from the speakers of an ice-cream truck: “*Prisoner Zero will vacate the human residence or the human residence will be incinerated ...*” What a setup: Madeleine L’Engle embracing Stephen King on the bridge of the battlestar *Galactica*. Sounds like a job for the Doctor—the 11th Doctor now, played by Matt Smith.

Smith’s might be (heretical thought!) the best Doctor yet. One minute brooding like Sherlock Holmes, the next as compact and exclamatory as Willy Wonka, with all of time and space his Chocolate Factory. He has a bony young/old face and cavalryman’s legs, and his idiom is demotic 21st-century Brit with jabs of Edwardian rhythm: “Twelve minutes? ... You can do loads in 12 minutes. Suck a mint! Buy a sledge! Have a fast bath!”

Those quaint little Daleks show up again, and he beats them again. Naturally. He’s the Doctor. A 950-year-old alien. A 47-year TV phenomenon. And a *koan* of a knock-knock joke. ■

James Parker is an Atlantic contributing editor.