Good Doctor, you had me at ‘Who’

Nearly 50 years after its debut, time-traveling series shares another convert

Christopher Borrelli

Until recently, I assessed the stature of limitations on my chances of becoming a Doctor Who fan long since expired — sometimes around the decline of communism and the rise of Sir Mix-A-Lot, if I had to guess.

Simply put, the series, which celebrates its 50th anniversary Saturday (yes, it debuted in England less than 24 hours after JFK was shot), never spoke to me. The few times during the 1990s when I tried to watch (always after school, always in the unexplored country of PBS afternoon programming, always when the Brady Bunch was visiting Hawaii in a rerun, it felt imperceptible. What’s a TARDIS? And a Dalek? Are those the robots on wheels that look like portable gyro-stabilized machines? What’s with the flying phone booth? And this “Doctor,” curvy haired with a full-jogging suit and wild, bug-eyed grin? What’s he a doctor of? Was he actually Donald Sutherland? Or that hairy, limber hippy from progressive ’70s menswear?

No, I would not be a Who-ian.

Decades passed before I gave “Doctor Who” another thought.

Then, around the 45th year of the show’s existence, I began to run into friends, relatives and acquaintances all inexplicably obsessed with this sci-fi eccentricity. Largely dormant for the 15 years prior, Doctor Who had been rebooted in 2005 and, despite the age of the franchise, was becoming a late-blooming phenomenon, one of the most popular TV shows in the world. It’s so successful now that its anniversary will be marked with a hugely anticipated “Day of the Doctor” special airing Saturday on BBC America and Nov. 25 in movie theaters nationwide. Even more unlikely for such a quaint, nerdy pop wallpaper: Its newest, biggest fans were female.

 Intrigued, I decided to wade in to see what I had been missing. And immediately I was startled. Here was a show with decades of plot, operating in a genre once known for accommodating dumb questions, and yet “Doctor Who” — both the fandom and the unexpectedly cheerful series — was genuinely, genuinely good.

Take Minyon Lafort, 36-year-old Chicago doctor/manager for intellectual property lawyers, who told her about my persistent allegiance to her favorite TV show, and, unlike the sneering, snotting mankind that I expected, she sympathized. She had recently become a Who-ian herself. “I’ve always liked period dramas, but I found sci-fi intimidating.”

So she? She invited me to her home to watch Doctor Who. “We’re all alone. It’s just the two of us and the show.” I would have to learn about each Doctor. There are more than one. And know his companions? No. But there’s something comforting about that fact, having been reconstructed. And the spin-offs? The Christmas specials? I have patience issues! All I want are a bunch of comedy podcasts! I want to listen to, and when my parents ask me to dinner, I say “But I have all this TV to watch!”

“’No, no, I couldn’t add ‘Doctor Who’ to that.” Then she said that she and some other friends had forked over $3 to get into Doctor Who. “And there was no shortage of advice. But it was always the equivocal and reliable kind. You can’t watch the show wrong (but usually you can watch it out of sequential order). It’s cheery but deep. Come up (lost profundity).”

I was offered list of episodes to watch (and not watch). For emotional support, I was sent links to fan forums. This is not an unfandom fandom. Jennifer Kelley, co-founder of Chicago TARDIS, one of the largest “Doctor Who” conventions in the world (Nov. 29-Dec. 1, at the Westin in Lombard), said, “If anyone tells you they like everything about Doctor Who, be suspicious.”

Throughout the ’90s, and as late as 2014, interest in the BBC-born series had waned so severely, Kelley said, that she assumed her then-modest 4-year-old convention was on its last legs. The fandom had become disinterested. Even as I got started, when a fan told me to watch “Series 3 with the 11th Doctor” and I asked for clarification, they had to explain that Whovians refer to seasons of the show as “series” but seasons of the original 26-year run as “seasons.”

For all its intimacy, the Whovians are a tight-knit community of fans who celebrate the show’s annual anniversary. In fact, the first time I watched “Doctor Who,” I did not like it. The second time, I liked it. The third time, I loved it.

That’s why I’m still watching. That’s why I’m still fellin’ for the Doctor. And it matters. The character regularly dies and regenerates as a new Doctor. This allows for a seamless transition between lead actors.

Largely dormant for 15 years, “Doctor Who” was rebooted in 2005 and became one of the most popular TV shows in the world.

David Tennant was the 10th Doctor on the BBC America series “Dr. Who.” The show celebrates its 50th anniversary this week.

Tom Baker was the longest-running Doctor, the fourth, from 1974 to 1981.

Matt Smith plays the current Doctor. The character regularly dies and regenerates as a new Doctor. This allows for a seamless transition between lead actors.

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What's what in ‘Who’

Understanding “Doctor Who,” in an afternoon:

**Step 1:** Know the following. “The Doctor” has no first or last name, only a title. He travels through time and space in a thin British police booth; he calls this a TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimension in Space). He often brings along a companion, who changes periodically. Also, the Doctor, who is an eccentric, frazzled, ancient alien, periodically dies. He is “regenerated” as a new Doctor (a plot device for managing a seamless transition between lead actors). Foes are varied but are often aliens bent on assimilation; some of the most popular have been Daleks and Cybermen.

**Step 2:** Don’t try to know everything. The series began in 1963 and lasted until 1989; it was rebooted in 2005. Many fans of the series tend to be fans of the first series or the second series but rarely both. If you are younger than 50, start with the rebooted series; if you are older than 50, start with the original. The very first years of the show (which began on the BBC) were in black and white and mostly episodic; production values remained iffy into the 1980s. The rebooted series is less episodic, more story arc-driven.

**Step 3:** Find an entry point. The casual watcher should start with “Blink,” a 2007 episode starring Carey Mulligan and murderous stone statues. (It is also what fans refer to as a “Doctor-lite” episode, the Doctor being more support than star.) If that works: Continue with the first episode of the 2005, 2006 or 2011 seasons and watch until the Doctor dies; the first episode of each tenure is a brief reintroduction to the new Doctor and the show itself. The most popular recent Doctors have been David Tennant (10th Doctor) and Matt Smith (11th Doctor). The most popular classic Doctor was Tom Baker, who served for seven years, from 1974 until 1981. The best entry points for the original series include the very first episode, “An Unearthly Child,” and “The Ark in Space” from 1975.

— C.B.
Where to find ‘Doctor’

There are three good places for finding episodes:

- BBC America, which airs the show at various times (and quite often now, during the show’s anniversary season this year).
- The helpful new BBC America video series “Doctor Who: The Doctors Revisited,” which showcases some episodes selected from the show’s 50-year history.
- Netflix, which streams the entire series since 2005.

storylines felt more “CSI”-like and self-contained than “Wire”-like and serial. Some serialized series’ sense of narrative has been lost in casualness (from 2005 on, the show became less episodic, the production values shared a drab, muted, sheen, which stood out even in an era characterized by special effects, humor, and surreal, almost surreal, storylines. This is one of many stories where the ever-present tone of the narrative is not just about plot, but about the atmosphere of the show.

The BBC America video series “Doctor Who: The Doctors Revisited” features some episodes selected from the show’s 50-year history. Netflix offers a full catalog of the series since 2005.

Getting a sense of the show’s tone can be challenging for new viewers. The show’s style is often characterized by its use of humor, wit, and a sense of the absurd. The show’s premise is that the Doctor is a time-traveling alien who travels through time and space, fighting evil forces and protecting the fabric of reality. The show’s humor is often dark, with a sense of irony and self-awareness. The show’s tone can be unpredictable, with moments of lightheartedness and moments of intense drama. The show’s visual style is often characterized by its use of special effects and its reliance on a sense of the surreal. The show’s music is often an integral part of its tone, with themes that are both catchy and eerie.

The show’s narrative is often characterized by its use of multiple story arcs and its willingness to explore complex themes. The show’s tone is often challenging, with moments of philosophical reflection and moments of raw emotion. The show’s narrative is often characterized by its use of humor and wit, with a sense of the absurd. The show’s tone can be unpredictable, with moments of lightheartedness and moments of intense drama. The show’s visual style is often characterized by its use of special effects and its reliance on a sense of the surreal. The show’s music is often an integral part of its tone, with themes that are both catchy and eerie.

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