

# Good Doctor, you had me at 'Who'

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



**CHRISTOPHER BORRELLI**

Until recently, I assumed the statute of limitations on my chances of becoming a "Doctor Who" fan had long since expired — sometime 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 1970s 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 impenetrable. What's a TARDIS? And a Dalek? Are those the robots on wheels that look like portable gyro-slicing machines? What's with the flying phone booth? And this "Doctor," curly haired with a folk-singer scarf and wild, bug-eyed glint? What's he a doctor of? Was he actually Donald Sutherland? Or that hairy, limber hippy from progressive '70s sex manuals?

No, I would not be a Whovian.

Decades passed before I gave "Doctor Who" another thought.

Then, around the 47th 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 phenom, one of the most popular TV shows in the world. It's so successful by 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 antique, 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 not known for accommodating dumb questions, and yet "Doctor Who" — both the fandom and the unexpectedly cheerful series — was generous, accommodating.

Take Mindy Laff, a 50-year-old Chicago docket manager for intellectual property lawyers. I told her about my persistent allergy to her favorite TV show, and, unlike the sneering, sighing misanthrope I expected, she sympathized. She had recently become a Whovian herself: "I've always liked geekdom, but I found sci-fi communities impossible. So cliquey! I was intimidated. I didn't hate the show. But 50 years of story? Really? And, like, 200 plots? And I would have to learn about each Doctor? There are more than one? And know his companions? And the 130-something missing episodes that fans have somehow reconstructed? And the spinoffs? And the Christmas specials? I have patience issues! I already have 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 a year ago I met some 'Doctor Who' fans and asked them how to get into it. And they said: 'What can we tell you?' They were so nice to the casually curious." Sounds suspiciously like a cult? Well, yes.

I am a Whovian now.



BBC AMERICA PHOTOS

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



BBC ONE PHOTO

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

A Whovian poseur, perhaps, but I aspire to pure Whovian. If the Whovians will have me.

Here's how it happened: I started by soliciting Chicago for tips on how to get into "Doctor Who," and there was no shortage of advice. But it was always the equivocal and relatable kind: You can't watch the show wrong (but usually you can watch it out of sequential order), it's cheesy (but deep), corny (but profound). I was offered lists of episodes to watch (and not watch). For emotional support, I was sent links to fan forums.

This is not an uncritical 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 2004, interest in the BBC-born series had



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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waned so severely, Kelley said, that she assumed her then-modest 4-year-old fandom had become cloistered. Even as I got started, when a fan told me to watch "Series 5 with the 11th Doctor" and I asked for clarification, they had to explain that Whovians refer to seasons of the new show as "series" but seasons of the original 26-year run as "seasons."

Huh.

Generally, though, the Whovians — earnest, a touch twee, too fast to laugh at its inside jokes — were ridiculously well-prepared for wannabes.

"The wonderful thing about the 'Doctor' is it changes tone, style and narrative so often that if you don't like it one week,

you might love it the next," said Paul Booth, an assistant professor in DePaul University's College of Communication who studies cult TV fandoms (and also edited "Fan Phenomena: Doctor Who," part of the University of Chicago Press' new series of books on fan culture).

Allegra Rosenberg, an 18-year-old Skokie high school student who developed a sizable online following for her "Doctor Who"-inspired ukulele ballads (later employed by BBC America in the marketing of the show), sent me a three-step indoctrination regimen. Step one was: "There's nothing much you need to know ..."

Nothing at all, other than, she added, the following: "The basic process of regen-

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# What's what in 'Who'

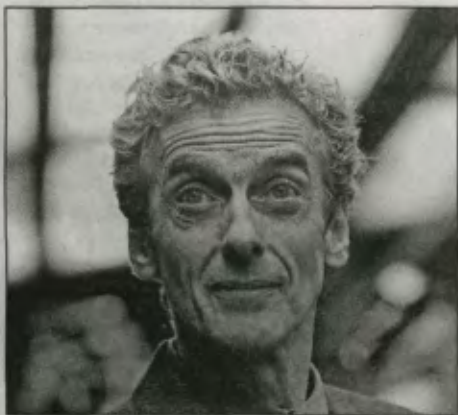
Understanding "Doctor Who," in an afternoon:

**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.



GETTY-AFP PHOTO

Peter Capaldi begins his reign as the new Doctor next year.

eration (when the Doctor switches bodies, in a trick of alien biology), and the fact he travels through time and space in a blue (British) police box — all things you probably know already through pop cultural osmosis, so you're good to go."

I began with "The Aztecs," a four-parter from 1964 that looks as though it were shot, well, at your local PBS station. The Doctor (who has no name, only a title) was William Hartnell, the first Doctor, then in his 50s, though looking much older. He lands in a 15th-century Mexico re-created on a BBC budget by way of an overlighted sound-stage. He finds himself witness to a human sacrifice. He's abrasive, impatient. At the end, having prevented the sacrifice but failing to dissuade the Aztecs from thinking that killing a man will bring rain, the Doctor is asked by a companion time traveler, "What's the point of traveling through time and space if you can't change anything?" And the Doc says, sincerely, "You failed to save a civilization, but at least you helped one man."

"Tomb of the Cybermen," from 1967, was better (though production values would not improve for decades). Its black-and-white glow began to look like a dream state. You could see how that slow, creeping, low-budget starkness — and its plot about a race of metal men who want to re-create humanity in its likeness (the erasing of eccentricity and personality a favorite goal of "Doctor Who" villains) — crawled into young brains. It also begged to be watched alongside a Twitter feed, so I'd know if I was the only one who thought Cybermen were reminiscent of Devo or that their warning of "Struggle is futile" was adopted by "Star Trek."

By the time I made it to Tom Baker in the '70s — the longest-running Doctor, the Doctor of my childhood — and the funny "City of Death" story arc (co-written by "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" author Douglas Adams), I was hooked. It was silly, comforting and wry: Aliens want to steal the Mona Lisa, which never does make sense, an absurdity the Doctor seems to enjoy. (Tellingly, Monty Python's John Cleese makes a cameo.) The irony I didn't have patience for as a 10-year-old, and as an adult assumed was absent, looked keenly of-the-moment in my 40s. More surprising: Though decades of mythology had accumulated by the end of the Baker days, the

storylines felt more "CSI"-like and self-contained than "Wire"-like and serial.

As for the rebooted series: What's been lost in casualness (from 2005 on, the show became less episodic, the production values sharper) has been gained in shrewdness, sheer watchability. Each Doctor's "regeneration," each handing down of the role — often during holiday specials — is now a chance to repeat the 50-year-old premise, as reassuring as a mantra. And each new Doctor seemed to get younger, the most recent two being frenzied David Tennant and lanky Matt Smith, an actor so youthful he seems to still be forming.

At the risk of sounding glib, basically "Doctor Who" became "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," speaking to its self-referential audience in a hip shorthand of knowingly cheesy dooms and pop lingua franca. Which is partly intentional: "The funny thing is we always looked to American television," said Marcus Wilson, one of the producers on the rebooted series. "The show always has, seeing American sci-fi fantasy as the gold standard. I guess we knew it would appeal to Americans. We just thought it would have happened earlier."

But the timing was perfect: "Not to get all scholarly, but 'Doctor Who' hit in America at a moment when fan culture was finally appropriated by mainstream culture," said Ashlyn Keef, a fan and 24-year-old graduate student in DePaul's media and cinema studies program. It also came at a moment when the most creative fanboys were fan-girls — in fact, one of the chapters of the "Fan Phenomena" book is about the relationship between "Doctor" fans and creative knitting. Which has given the reboot a reputation among some longtime fans as "a female thing. But there's a lot of latent sexism in nerd culture," said Christopher Olson, one of Keef's classmates.

Steven Hill, like many Chicago-born Whovians, discovered "Doctor Who" through WTTW-Ch. 11. He grew up watching the original series on Sunday nights. He remained loyal throughout the cult period, the wilderness years, the spectacular now. In 2009, Hill, a technology systems engineer for construction companies, created Gallifrey Base, an online "Doctor Who" fan forum. It now has 73,000 registered members and counting; in three years, it became the most trafficked Whovian meeting place in the world.

He is not willing to lose members: "The annoying thing about the fans who resent the newcomers is that they seem to forget newcomers have given this thing a renewed life. Without them, the show will die again," Hill said.

But the test, he said, is the new Doctor, Scottish actor Peter Capaldi, whose reign begins next year. At 55, Capaldi is the oldest Doctor since Hartnell, the very first Doctor. He is 24 years older than Matt Smith, the current Doctor, and he looks about 24 years older than Smith's predecessor, Tennant, who is still in his early 40s.

"But," Hill said, I think fans will learn to appreciate him — eventually."

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## 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 month).

■ The helpful new BBC America video series "Doctor Who: The Doctors Revisited," which showcases select episodes from its 50-year history.

■ Netflix, which streams every episode released since 2005.

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