

'Who' of BBC fame returns

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Doctor Who has two hearts and four more lives than a ca...

He's born again, tonight at 7 on Fox and Channel 26. Whether this life, No. 8 out of the time lord's 13, is destined to be a long one will depend on the

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whim and fancy of the Doctor's faithful fans.

Doctor Who is a new TV movie based on the BBC's long-running science-fiction series. The doctor premiered in England Nov. 23, 1963, and ran 26 years. PBS bought the series, which became a cult favorite in the United States.

In Britain, it's a TV institution. Whovians are to *Doctor Who* what Trekkies are to *Star Trek*.

The last time I saw *Doctor Who*, space aliens wore tin cans, silver-painted wet suits and car headlights on their heads; the special effects were a hoot.

Tonight we see a state-of-the-art *Who* for the '90s, with everything from digital effects to prosthetics. The special effects may be too good. They make me nostalgic for the tin-can days.

A hearty sprinkling of the humor that made *Doctor Who* a sci-fi style-setter in years past remains, and the story is probably convoluted enough to satisfy his original fans. It may confuse newcomers, but it should keep them in their seats if they like car chases, body snatching, bloody confrontations and



The Doctor (Paul McGann), center, and Dr. Grace Holloway (Daphne Ashbrook) are forced to battle The Master (Eric Roberts) in *Doctor Who*.

impending catastrophes, marked by an atomic clock, ticking off the minutes to the millennium.

Six years ago the good Doctor took his last TV trip, and when we meet again, Sylvester McCoy, who played *Who* at show's end in '89, is back. But then he regenerates into a younger, quite charming *Who*, played by Paul McGann, a good choice for the role.

The Doctor has survived death and changed actors seven times. William Hartnell was *Who* when the series started. Three years later, he decided he'd had enough, and the producers

decided to let *Who* die and come back in a new body. Thus *Doctor Who*'s 13 lives were born.

(To explain these changes to casual viewers, suffice it to say that all time lords have 13 lives. *Dr. Who* and his archenemy, The Master, are time lords.)

Patrick Troughton followed Hartnell. Then came Jon Pertwee (1970), Tom Baker (1974), Peter Davison (1982), Colin Baker (1984) and McCoy

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(1987).

Peter Cushing starred in two *Doctor Who* movies, but the producers of this movie don't count that as a regeneration. They say Whovians don't consider anything but the BBC series to be part of the *Doctor Who* mythology.

The Master has spent all 13 of his lives since the two time lords last met. Now Who is flying what remains of The Master to the far galaxies to put him away forever. He never gets there. Doctor Who's TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimensions in Space machine) crashlands in San Francisco on Dec. 30, 1999.

The Doctor steps out of the police call booth that is his entry to TARDIS, and is greeted by a bullet to one of his hearts. A snakelike glob, the remains of The Master, slithers out to find a temporary body. He chooses a nice paramedic

(played with post-possession gusto by Eric Roberts). His ambulance delivers Who to the emergency room, where he expires on the operating table.

Who's heart surgeon, Dr. Grace Holloway (Daphne Ashbrook), botches it because she doesn't know her patient has two hearts. Who goes to the morgue to take a new body. It's that body that The Master's slimeball is after.

The BBC made 723 episodes of *Doctor Who*, but 80 of them are now lost. The Doctor Who Appreciation Society still meets every year in England.

"They celebrate the character; they really care," *Who* executive producer Philip Segal said. "People in Great Britain, including people who don't go to those meetings, are really excited it's being brought back; it's a huge thing over there."

If it's so beloved in Britain, why did it end?

"People took it for granted after 26 years," said Jo Wright, BBC's executive producer of drama series. "It's like *Star Trek*. When it went away, everybody wanted it back."