

DOCTOR WHO'S ON FIRST

A few months back I inquired as to what had become of the horror film. Now another Baroque worry: what ever happened to the fun in science fiction? I don't mean humor particularly (not that that hasn't always been in short supply in the field aside from the most sophomoric booze 'n broads variety).

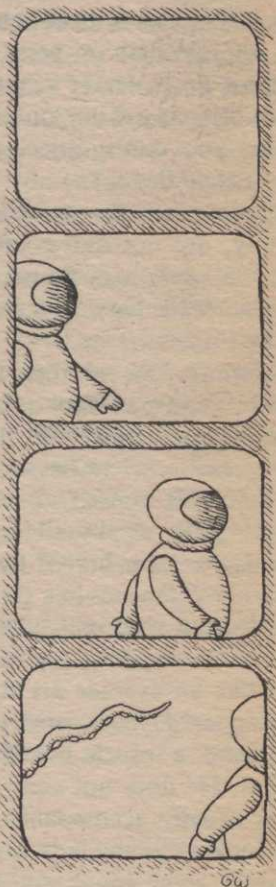
No, I mean the more general sort of fun, the sort of story that doesn't take itself too seriously. I'm beginning to worry that it may be a vanishing quality, now that s/f is grown up and wears a suit and tie and goes to University. An ominous sign was the inability of much of the science fiction Establishment to cope with *Star Wars*. It seemed to be a sort of "here we've struggled so long to make science fiction respectable and intellectual and we don't need this sort of childishness any more" attitude.

Well, they're going to *hate Doctor Who*.

We Americans have had hints across the Water for many years about the BBC's *Doctor Who*. We've seen at least two movies which were made up of mangled versions of a couple of the mini-series into which the over-all *Doctor Who* series is divided. We had heard how early on in the run the

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the robot Daleks, inhabited by alien intelligences, had inspired every other child in England into behaving like Tik Tok of Oz, badly worrying innumerable parents.

But now we will be able to judge for ourselves; 98 half hours (23 mini-series of 2 to 6 episodes) have been put into syndication here, which means it could be popping up anywhere on your dial at any time. From what I've seen, it is well worth searching out (if, of course, you don't object to fun with science fiction).

These particular episodes, by the way, are not dated left-overs from ten years ago. Some, if not all, reportedly have not yet been seen in England.

First of all, who is Doctor Who? Doctor Who "roams through space and time" as an "intergalactic scientific adviser," and describes himself as a "time Lord." This would all be very comic book super hero if the good doctor were done up in a skin tight silver leotard with matching cape, helmet and bag. But, typically, he looks like an average art student, with squashy hat, omnipresent scarf, and a touch of Sherlock Holmes. He does not carry arms, and is usually accompanied by a good looking young lady with, for a change, some spunk and intelligence (I was reminded of the Susan St. James roles on *Name of the*

Game and MacMillan and Wife).

Now here's a stroke of genius and a good indication of the general attitude of the whole thing: Doctor Who's space/time ship is, on the outside, the exact replica of a mild-mannered London call box (phone booth to us), but is larger on the inside than the outside, chock full of handy gadgets, and can go anywhere. Now *that's* funny.

For this review, I saw a ten minute promotional film made up of highlights from the series, and part 1 of the two-part adventure called "The Sontaran Experiment."

There were some goodies in the highlights, including a marvelous mobile Martian mummy, a spectacular blue person of indeterminate sex who absorbed energy, and an enchanting robot dog shaped something like a large toaster, with a limited vocabulary made up for by a vigorously wagging metal tail.

The series seems particularly good on aliens; the examples I saw had imaginative and varied make-ups that were still consistently convincing.

In part 1 of "The Sontaran Experiment" there were some extremely complex and sophisticated concepts set up. The Doctor and friends return to Earth 10,000 years in the future; it is deserted, most of the inhabitants having re-

settled in other parts of the Galaxy just before some unspecified Solar disaster. However, in the previous mini-series, *Doctor Who* and friends have apparently rediscovered a legendary space station where some part of the population had gone into suspended animation and overslept.

Doctor Who & Co. return to the supposedly deserted Earth to fix the transmat system there, which is out of whack after all this time (the young lady arrives up-sidedown in a patch of heather). But-aha!-the planet is not uninhabited; not only is there a stranded crew of Colonials ("I can tell by your accent," says *Doctor Who*), but an advance guard of one of the evil Sontarans (who look like anthropoid toads without the toads' friendly expression) and who has a death dealing robot with him.

What a stew! The colonials don't trust the doctor ("Don't give us any of that *Mother Earth* rubbish"), the robot is chasing everybody all over the landscape, and the Sontaran has captured Sarah ("Ah. The female of the species.").

Continued next week.
I could have seen part 2, but

frankly wanted to wait until it came on my own set, where I could put my feet up, sip my Saturday afternoon martini, and have a good at-home giggle.

From these examples, I have high hopes for the series. It is indeed made for children, but it makes such lame American-made series such as *Lost in Space* look twice as idiotic as they did already. There is also the fact, as I noted last month, that the English have had a perpetual genius for creating fiction "for children" that operates on other levels that are hugely enjoyable for adults.

If *Doctor Who* does indeed fulfill this promise, it could indeed, in its own way, be as much fun as *Star Wars*, give us something good humored to look forward to weekly (to fill the void left by the late lamented *Quark*), and put some fun back into science fiction.

Will the colonials accept *Doctor Who*? Will Sarah escape the toad-faced Sontaran? Will the Doctor find his sonic screwdriver which he lost while repairing the transmat?

Tune in next week (or whenever) and find out for yourself.

