

A Starburst Interview by John Fleming

TERRANCE DICKS



Two scenes from the highly popular Jon Pertwee series of *Doctor Who*, for which Terrance Dicks was the script editor.

Back in the late 1940s and early 1950s," says Terrance Dicks, "Woolworths used to have a kind of dump counter where they sold cheap American magazines: *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Black Mask Detective Stories* and *Thrilling Ranch Romances*. I used to buy the first two but never fancied the romances—and that was really what got me started, I suppose."

Terrance Dicks was born in London's East Ham and went on to read English at Cambridge University. After two years National Service in the army he became a copywriter and, during five years in the advertising business, began to sell some of his drama work. Eventually, he was able to become a full-time freelance writer working initially in radio, then in television. Among his early credits were episodes of **The Avengers** and the soap opera **Crossroads**. He is very grateful to the much-maligned **Crossroads**.

"In my day," he says, "it was like a relay race. You had to write four scripts for a week in a week and then somebody else did the next week. That was very good training: having to work to a very tight deadline."

One of the other writers on **Crossroads** was Derrick Sherwin who, a few years later, phoned Dicks up out-of-the-blue. Sherwin said he was leaving his job as script editor on **Doctor Who** and would Terrance be interested? "I was a freelance writer at the time," says Dick. "That's a fairly precarious way of making a living and the BBC was offering an initial three-month contract. So I thought, well, whatever happens it can't be bad. It's three months regular money. And there went the next six years of my life just like that. I'd had no connection with **Doctor Who** before that, except as a viewer, but these things are often done in a fairly casual, last-minute way. A lot of one's life is dependent on chance."

Dicks is the longest-serving script editor on the long-running show and, during his time there, he worked on other programmes such as the ill-fated BBC tv series **Moonbase 3**. In 1974, he also wrote a **Doctor Who** stage play. But his main work was script editing the **Doctor Who** television series. He worked closely with producer Barry Letts on the outline of each season: "We would sit down and say, right, we have five shows to get out. What kind of shows are they going to be? Who are we going to get to write them? And so we would come up with the basic story idea, then call in the writer and discuss it with him." On a technically complicated show like **Doctor Who**, the script editor is responsible for the script from this initial conception stage, through first draft and re-writes into production—working with the director, making cuts and alterations. "You're midwife to a television show," says Dicks: "From the first gleam in its creator's eye until it actually goes on the screen."

Doctor Who is a continuing show, controlled by a producer and a script editor, interpreted by a usually well-established lead-actor. So doesn't that mean individual writers, creating only isolated stories, have little impact? Dicks disagrees: "Good stories and bad stories will affect the ratings. Not enormously, but they do. It isn't true to say that you can put any old rubbish on week after week and people will watch it because it's **Doctor Who**. It absolutely isn't and, at times, the show's been known to slip. To some extent, it also depends what ITV puts up against you. In my time, they tried **Space 1999**, which pulled some figures for the first week and then slipped and slipped because people went back to watching **Doctor Who**. I think **Space 1999** ended up somewhere like 11.00am on a Saturday morning: a sort of elephants' graveyard. They tried putting various other things against us, but nothing worked in my time."

Recently, ITV has split-networked **Buck Rogers** against the show in slightly-varying time-slots. In some regions, **Buck** has beaten **Doctor Who** and, in most, it appears to have drawn a significant proportion of the audience away from the BBC show—hardly surprising, given the vast difference in budget. Dicks believes, though, that this is probably a short-term defection of viewers: "When you've been on for eighteen years, as **Doctor Who** has, anything new has the attraction of novelty for a time. But **Doctor Who** is going to be on for a longer part of the year and I imagine it will gradually pull the viewers ▶

back again."

Doctor Who does, of course, change in style—normally gradually, sometimes suddenly. When Terrance Dicks replaced Derrick Sherwin as script editor, Barry Letts became the new producer and Jon Pertwee took over the central role from Patrick Troughton. So the show's three most important influences changed simultaneously and the direction of the series was bound to alter. "The first element," explains Dicks, "was Jon Pertwee's personality, which gave you a new kind of Doctor. And then the sort of predilections that Barry and I had also came into it.

"In my case, that was basically for a fast-moving, action-adventure show. I used to see it in the grand old tradition of *The Perils of Pauline* and the Saturday morning cinema serials. If you have a four or six-part show with cliff-hangers, the main thing is it's got to move, got to hook the audience, got to be exciting. The message and to sociological significance are there, but they're secondary to good, popular entertainment. I don't think the two are incompatible. Look at Charles Dickens. He used to publish his books as serials. For the long, well-plotted story which works on all kinds of levels, he's unparalleled. Not only is it funny or dramatic with plot twists, but you can also approach it with great earnestness about symbolism or the dark side of human nature and the pressures of society and it's all there. It's just incredibly rich. **Doctor Who** I wouldn't compare with Dickens but I think, for a long time, it has been good and popular in a way few other shows have. One of the interesting things about it, too, is the way its viewership goes right across the board."

However, there does seem to be a distinct difference between the show's British and American fans. Terrance Dicks says, "In Britain, the letters I get are mostly from kids of about twelve who watch the show and read the **Doctor Who** books. The American letters I get are mostly from young adults—sometimes people in their thirties and forties. American science fiction fans are extraordinary. They're like football fans in Britain. I went to the first **Doctor Who** Convention in Los Angeles, which was extraordinary. Unbelievable. They dress up as the characters. I went to New York last year to see my publishers. We went out to lunch and this character popped out of the woodwork with a bag of jelly beans which he'd gone and bought specially because he knew I was coming and he was a New York **Doctor Who** fan. Quite a nice gesture, I thought."

Although Dicks left as **Doctor Who** script editor in 1974, he is still associated with the show in fans' minds because of the **Doctor Who** books. The television series became popular in 1963 with the arrival of the Daleks, who spawned a craze that swept the country. There were Dalek mugs, mirrors, wallpaper, bedspreads, badges and books. For some bizarre reason, though, the three **Doctor Who** books issued at the time were published as hardbacks. They sold modestly, but made no great impact. Ten years later, Target Books re-published the novels in paperback with attractive new covers. They sold very well.

According to Terrance Dicks, Target realised they might be on to a winner, went to the BBC and said "We must have more **Doctor Who** books! Who can we get to write them?" Dicks had always wanted to

write a book, so he said he would: "I wrote the first of what you might call the new wave **Doctor Who** books—*The Auton Invasion*. That sold as well as the others had, maybe even better because it had a newer story." By the time Target knew they had struck gold, Dicks was leaving as script editor to return to freelance writing (on, among other things, **Space 1999**). Gradually, he became the main writer of the Target novelisations.

"It's an interesting technical challenge," says Dicks: "Taking a television script and turning it into a book. It makes me mad when people say 'Oh, you've got it all done for you'. You admittedly get the dialogue and the basic storyline, but you've got to take everything that's on a television screen and put it on the pages of a book, which is bloody hard work. To make the books work and make them stand up in their own right—as books—is quite a job. I have been doing other things but, whenever I sit down with a pile of **Doctor Who** scripts and a sack of typing paper, I'm happy as a sandboy. I really still enjoy it. I wouldn't do it if I didn't. It's something I know I can do now, so it's a problem but one I can cope with."

Doctor Who got Terrance Dicks started as a book writer and it gave him a track record so that other publishers were interested in his work. His book series now include not just **Doctor Who** but also *The Mounties*, *Star Quest* and *The Baker Street Irregulars*. "The Irregulars," he says, "have sold all round the world to my astonishment. I suppose because it's a transferable idea. I've got editions up there on the shelf in Finnish and Norwegian and Spanish. Come to that, I've got **Doctor Who** books in Japanese! I tend to think in series. It's television



Above: **Doctor** (Tom Baker) as he appeared in the 1975 season of **Doctor Who**. Terrance Dicks was still script editor at this point. Opposite above: A scene from the Dicks-scripted Robot adventure from the first Tom Baker season of **Doctor Who**. Opposite below: Tom Baker and Elisabeth Sladen (as Sarah-Jane Smith) in the **Doctor's** roadster, *Bessie*.



training. Also, it's a good idea to keep things going if you can. I've done six of the Irregulars now. So I'll leave them for a while. If they continue to sell and there's a demand, I can come back and do six more because it's an infinitely-extensible idea.

"At the moment, I'm in the middle of writing the first in a series of children's horror stories. They're not about the same characters. They are like novels: different characters in each one. But they have the same theme. Each story will have some kind of horror or supernatural theme. The one I'm finishing at the moment is called *Cry Vampire* about a boy who discovers a vampire has moved into his town and nobody will believe him because he's only a kid. And the vampire realises only one person knows what he's up to and he's out to get him. You've got to handle it right, but basically kids love to be scared. They love monsters, ghosts, werewolves, vampires. I did a *Doctor Who* for television recently *State of Decay* which was really a vampire story."

As readers of British Marvel's *Doctor Who* monthly will know, *State of Decay* was originally written three years ago under the title *The Vampire Mutations* but was shelved because the BBC Drama Department was preparing a very expensive co-production of *Dracula* with Louis Jourdan starring and it was felt the *Doctor Who* story might lessen the impact of this major project.

"There are a lot of behind-the-sofa viewers for *Doctor Who*," says Terrance Dicks. "I'd always wanted to do vampires on the show. With horror, what's interesting is to write it in such a way that kids can handle it. You can't be like Stephen King; you can't be *that* scary. What's going to happen in all the horror stories I'm writing is that, eventually, good will triumph. The kid is going to destroy the vampire. The basic message of the book is that there is evil out there, but you can deal with it—which is basically a reassuring thing. In a way, that's possibly healthier than giving a message that life out there is all lovely and sweet, which any kid knows it isn't when he listens to the news."

What with his television scripts and novelisations and original books, Terrance Dicks' work covers a wide area but all of it in the children's field. Does he think this is a danger? "It's less respectable than being an adult novelist, I suppose. But I don't particularly think of myself as being a children's writer. I'm just a writer and one thing came from another. If ever I can get all my commitments for children's books cleared up, I'll probably turn to adult books. But while there are still lots of children's books to be written—I mean, I've got more *Doctor Who* books to do after this and this is a series of six and I've got various other ideas on the stocks that people are interested in. It's certainly no easier to write for children. It's the same as books and television. For some reason, a book writer is thought of as an entirely more respectable class of person. I don't know why that is. Nobody ever asks you for your autograph if you write for television but I've done thousands of autographs since I started doing books—at book-fairs and schools and conventions and all kinds of things. Being a television writer is totally obscure and anonymous. Your name flashes across the screen.

"Everything is swings and roundabouts. Television will make you more money in the short term but, when you've got it, basically that's it. A book won't make you very much money to start with, not compared to television. But, on the other hand, a book has a life of its own and continues. I'm still drawing royalties from the first *Doctor Who* book I ever wrote in 1974. It's now in its third or fourth edition and it's just trundling along out in the world without me having to do anything there. Whenever I get royalties for a book I wrote years ago, it's like winning the football pools. It doesn't occur to me I've done anything to deserve it. So that's very nice. Also, with a book, there's total control and nobody dares muck about with it. Your publishers ring you up and say 'We were thinking of possibly changing a word in line seventeen' and, if you say 'No! No! How dare you!' they say 'Oh—sorry. It was just an idea'. That is not how writers are treated in television. Television is a collaborative medium and you've got to act with

the script editor and the director, the producer, the actors, all kinds of people who're going to have ideas about it. You've got to defend it or change it or cut it. It's an entirely different operation and some writers can't take that. You've got to be fairly tough, I think, to function in television.

"As I say, it's swings and roundabouts. With books, you have got total control but it is lonely. It's just you and a pile of paper. You don't see anybody; you don't talk to anybody; you don't get any feedback. It's really the most solitary existence imaginable and it's very hard work. Writing for television, though, you get all the interest of the script conferences, meetings with the director and so on. I've gone back to script editing for a bit and I'm working on the BBC's Sunday afternoon *Classic Serial* (with Barry Letts, ex-producer of *Doctor Who*). What's fascinating is seeing a script right through all the stages of production again. After a week in television, I'm now quite happy it's Saturday night and I'm back writing my book. But it'll be nice for me to get away from this on Monday morning, go back to the BBC, talk to people and discuss things."

So where does Terrance Dicks go after his work on the *Classic Serial*?

"Well, I don't know really. My life tends to be totally unplanned. I came to *Doctor Who* purely by chance and I stayed there for six years. When I left that, I got into the book thing by chance. And, just as I was getting solidly established in that, I get an offer to go back to the BBC again and couldn't resist it because I'd had five years of rather solitary working life. Now I'm doing the *Classic Serial* and keeping up the books in my own time. I don't know. I may go on and do some other television thing. Basically, I feel I'm not really working unless I'm writing. I have a kind of feeling that's what I ought to be doing—writing—because that's what I'm good at and I shouldn't be led off on too many of these other things which are fun but not the same."

Right: Tom Baker poses for a publicity photograph with the car that the *Doctor* used in the 1975 season. Below right: A scene from the Dicks-scripted *Doctor Who* story, *The Horror of Fang Rock*, with Louise Jameson as the savage, *Leela*.





Above: The three vampire villains from the Dicks scripted Doctor Who story State of Decay. Below: The Doctor and Romana are surrounded by sinister hooded figures in the opening episode of the State of Decay adventure. Below right: A scene from the Dicks Doctor Who story Doctor of Fang Rock.

