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IT'S SUPDO

No, The Observer's Rachel Cooke isn't DrWho's new assistant...but she was one of millions of children who dreamt of filling that role. As the Tardis rematerialises in 2013, she wonders if the magic can be rekindled

I WANTED to be a journalist from an early age. I was about six, I think, when I began begging for a John Bull printing set for Christmas, and not much older when I started publishing *The Interim*, a low-down sensationalist rag with a circulation of one. But when people ask me, as they occasionally do, where I got this idea – Fleet Street might have been a million miles from the city I grew up in – I never give an honest answer. Most often, I'll try to be all clever and Proustian about it. I'll describe the Sunday routine of my parents' newspapers, how I associated this both with secrets – knowledge to which I then had no access – and the comforting smell of roasting beef.

What drove, in truth, I wanted to be a journalist because this was the profession of my childhood idol, Sarah Jane Smith, Doctor Who's longest-serving and most glamorous companion. Sarah Jane – who was plucky and dry-witted, and who had a way of wearing leggles (probably by city) that made you long to be grown up – was a reporter on Metropolitan Magazine. She walked into Doctor Who's life in 1973, when he was played by Jon Pertwee, but on the trail of a story (British scientists had mysteriously begun to disappear). She walked out of it in 1976, when the Doctor, now played by Tom Baker, at last returned her to her own time: 1960. In the years between, she fought all the worst badasses: cybermen, Daleks, Zygons.

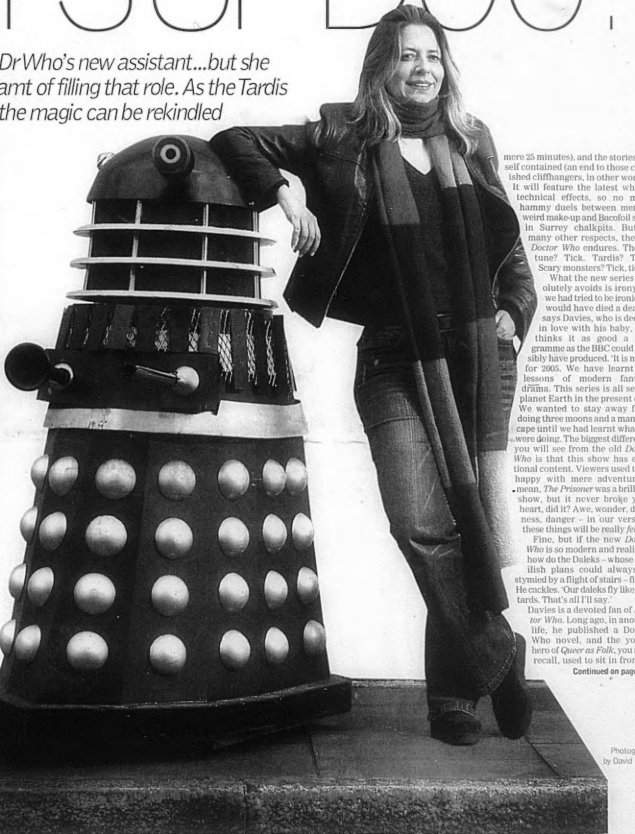
Even more impressively, she became adept at crossing the rough red terrain of alien planets in unsuitably fancy outfits. Mostly she looked like she was about to appear in a Fieffe ad. Yes, Sarah Jane was quite a girl. *Who didn't* want to follow in her footsteps? In our house, Doctor Who was a big deal. My brother and I loved the programme no less than other 'Doctor Who' fans on an *one hour* a parent would shout as Saturday television approached. This was the cue for frantic activity on our part. When we were very small, the ritual was always that we had to have bathed, washed our hair and put on our pyjamas well before the titles rolled, and I lived in fear of missing even the plummy BBC1 anniversary saying: 'And now...'. The point was that you had to be there, dressing down and slippers on, when the world was still silently spinning on its axis (younger readers may not know that before the days of the *hazy* dancers the BBC1 logo appeared appropriately in the circumstances, was a slowly turning monochrome graphic of planet Earth). It was not enough to arrive on the sofa as last week's cliffhanger ending was

replayed. Once, delayed by the ancient knots in my hair, I heard the Doctor Who theme from the landing. I moved so fast that my pyjama bottoms slipped and I turned an ankle on the stairs.

We were real fans. Not only did we buy the merchandise (my brother had a battery-operated Dalek; you pressed a button on its head and it would say: 'What are your orders?' or 'Exterminate! Exterminate!' or – this was the best one for annoying the parents – a shrill 'You will obey!'), but the lore of the series passed, almost without our noticing, into the lore of our family. Until she was three, my younger sister, Rebecca, answered only to the name 'Captain'. This was because the rest of us had decided that, before her hair grew, she looked like a Sontaran called Captain Lixx (Sontarans were powerfully-built aliens with potato-shaped heads and three fingers who were devoted to perpetual war, you could kill them with chronic acid, to which they were extremely vulnerable).

My father's toolbox was not merely full of screwdrivers. It was full of *gnome* screwdrivers. The shed at his allotment was sometimes known as the Tardis. I learned to knit specifically so I could make my timelord. Dad a *knitter* for Doctor Who scarf. Unfortunately, I got bored with this project early on, and the *knitted* thing – all eight inches of it – had to be turned into a bookmark.

THIS, THEN, IS a peculiar kind of week for me. Already I am being troubled by stuff I have not thought about for aeons. On Tuesday the BBC launches the return of *Doctor Who* after an absence of nine years (if you don't count the one-off TV movie which starred Paul McGann). The first episode of the new series, by Russell T Davies, writer of *Queer as Folk* and *Doctor Who*'s new creative director, will be screened at the end of this month. You would have to have been living on Mars – or, perhaps, the third moon of Delta Magna – not to know who has been cast as the timelord in his ninth incarnation, but just in case: this time the Doctor is to be Christopher Eccleston, an actor still best remembered for his role in *Star Wars*. Friends in the North. His assistant, Rose, has been played by Billie Piper. Each episode is an hour long (they used to last a



mere 25 minutes), and the stories are self-contained (an end to those cherished cliffhangers, in other words). It will feature the latest whizzy technical effects, so no more hammy duels between men in weird make-up and Beocof suits in Surrey chalkhills. But in many other respects, the old *Doctor Who* endures. Theme tune? Tick. 'Tardis!' Tick. Scary monsters? Tick, tick.

What the new series resolutely avoids is irony. 'If we had tried to be ironic, we would have died a death,' says Davies, who is deeply in love with his baby, and thinks it as good a programme as the BBC could possibly have produced. 'It was made for 2005. We have learnt the lessons of modern fantasy dramas. This series is all set on planet Earth in the present day. We wanted to stay away from doing three moons and a man in a cape until we had learnt what we were doing. The biggest difference you will see from the old *Doctor Who* is that this show has emotional content. Viewers used to be happy with mere adventure. I mean, *The Prisoner* was a brilliant show, but it never broke your heart, did it? Awe, wonder, darkness, danger – in our version, these things will be *really felt*. Fine, but if the new *Doctor Who* is so modern and realistic, how do the Daleks – those devilish plans could always be stymied by a flight of stairs – fit in? He chuckles. 'Our Daleks fit like bastards. That's all I'll say.'

Davies is a devoted fan of *Doctor Who*. Long ago, in another life, he published a *Doctor Who* novel, and the younger version of *Queer as Folk*, who may recall, used to sit in front of

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TO THE GLORY DAYS YETIS SAVED GOODGE STREET STATION, AND CYBERMEN ROAMIED ST PAUL'S. NOW WE'RE BACK ON PLANET EARTH AGAIN

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his video recorder, shouting: 'I bring Stuart's gift of death to you all now.' (Then he says: 'The BBC's have damn sense!') Such is the strength of Davies' feeling that, were he not a doctor, he would be a novelist who writes on the internet, trying to read the runes with all the other observers. But this doctor, it seems, has particularly cares what the diarchs make of it. The 're'lib members of the Flat Earth Society. It would be mad to take them too seriously. A second series was hugely well commissioned, so we are delighted on ratings. The fans are huge, but there's only about 2,000 of them maximum.

When I tell him that people do send such letters, he is wary. The BBC's hope is that children will watch the shows with their parents - and at the moment these children have not even heard of *Doctor Who*. In any case, buzz does not always translate into viewers. You're in the eye of the storm. You think everyone's talking about it. Then you get in a taxi, and the driver says: 'No, you're bringing that back.'

MAKING ITS DEBUT in flickery black and white on 25 NOVEMBER 83, *Doctor Who* was the broadcast of Sydney Newman, a Canadian producer, who had been poached from TV to lift the BBC's drama output. It began as an inauspicious, 15-minute pilot for a science-fiction programme. It started 17 minutes late, but it covered the essential material of Promet Keen (the previous day). So few people watched that it did not get a regular slot. On a busy week, it was saved from extinction by viewers, who responded in significant numbers to the way the show turned the everyday world unexpectedly upside down.

Doctor Who was at its best when Earth was under attack, when Yetis roamed Goodge Street station, when Cybermen stalked the streets by St Paul's, when Sea Devils emerged from the grey mists of the North Sea. In Britain, the mundane was not always what it seemed. Show dumplings could carry the life of these wares to Aston and I can reveal that you make a comeback in the first episode of the new *Doctor Who* doctors, telephone.

It is difficult to come up with unexpected murderous instincts. Most fortunately of all, science was not always to be feared. (Then he says: 'The BBC's experiment went wrong. Result! Magnets of evil proportions. The Doctor, even when played by crutches, white-haired William Hartnell, was a child of the sixties, and always strongly anti-authoritarian, for all that he travelled through space and time in a police telephone box. He was a child of the television, played by Ian Pertwee, he was excited to earth and worked for the military under the angle of a man called the Brigadier. Then even this improved his snappy behaviour. He dressed like a dandy - Jim Hendrix meets Jimmy Tarbuck - and was rude as possible when anyone tried to rein him in, even poor Sarah Jane.

Tom Baker, generally considered the best *Doctor* of all it was during his reign that ratings peaked at 16 million. Newman played him as a swivel-eyed, unpredictable Bohemian, quite fruity and cruel, but he kept a crick ball in his pocket - but rolled, too, and not to disdainful will - social politics are not going to concern the would say, 'Or Transmuter?'). Well, I don't suppose we can expect to see the 're'lib members. It was impossible not to love him.

AFTER BAKER, THE REST... In First there was Peter Davison, fresh from *Albion Crewman Great and Small*, and looking for a career. He kept a crick ball in his pocket - but rolled, too, and not to disdainful will - social politics are not going to concern the would say, 'Or Transmuter?'). Well, I don't suppose we can expect to see the 're'lib members. It was impossible not to love him.

JON PERTWEE WAS RUDE TO EVERYONE, AND DRESSED LIKE A CROSS BETWEEN JIMI HENDRIX AND JIMMY TARBUK

years the show underwent a renaissance, with great writing and more thoughtful plots. But I am not convinced that the series was really lively. Besides, by now we were all too sophisticated to turn a blind eye to such things as the 're'lib members - an adversary who appeared to be made out of giant liquors alcohols.

By 1987 the number of shows had been halved and the programme continued to be a disappointment. Finally, Michael Grade, then controller of BBC1, gave the go to a show he always disliked. How the chairman feels about its return, I've no idea (it was commissioned by Lorraine Heggessey, who was, until last year, controller of BBC1, after a paid audit it is Britain's most missed TV programme. Still, as the *Doctor* might have put it: 'One must always accept the unexpected.'

They took us into the parallel universe that is the fandom, and it could be forgiven for thinking that *Who* had never been of our acres. *Doctor Who* magazine is still published, as are the *Who* novels. On the internet, activity abounds. Visit wholive.com if you wish to find out anything at all full for the dials. 'It was easy to become a dandy. You could copy them in the playground, and exterminate your teacher. He sounds fearless at the thought. It's charming and funny and very British because it's all about saving the world on a shooting - or even a piece of string and a bottlestop,' says Clayton Hickman, the 26-year-old editor of *Doctor Who* magazine. His circulation: it currently hovers at around 30,000. He tells me, on the radio: 'They're like lapdog Christians. They're all coming back.'

Out in *Doctor Who* land, the word on the new series is very positive. The fans are thrilled that the show is getting the budget it deserves, and that Eccleston, who has real stature - has been cast. 'He's a superb actor,' says Waitner. 'I've done a lot of research on him.' Hickman agrees: 'He's an unusual choice (the smart money was always on Bill Nighy) because he's a doctor. But there's a lot of excitement about him.'

Both men are also thrilled that Davies is in charge of the writing, and that Mark Gatiss, of the *League of Gentlemen*, and Steven Moffat, who writes *Coupling*, will play later episodes. Such commitment

There are around 8,000 active fans in Britain, activity being measured by the number of DVDs bought (not only 10 per cent of them are women), and they regularly attend conventions where they meet their favourite characters. 'It's a pension,' says Davies, who accepts he doesn't know how many this series' word - and says you for arcane discussion groups. Did Rassilon know about the 're'lib members? 'I don't know if he's? No. The capital 'H'.'

Why, I wonder, the adoration without end? 'I'm fond of the show, but only when there are limits.' It's the best soap opera in the world,' says Anthony Waitner, who writes *Coupling*. Such commitment

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Tom Baker, the 'best Doctor ever', with Mary Tamm and K9, 1974

Society (theoretical physicist) Nicholas Courtney, aka the Brigadier. 'It's not different from *Star Trek*, in a sense. It's warm, human, with great story-telling. Walter, a teacher who owns a full set of dials, is the Doctor's robot dog, became known as a child when he fell for the dials. 'It was easy to become a dandy. You could copy them in the playground, and exterminate your teacher. He sounds fearless at the thought. It's charming and funny and very British because it's all about saving the world on a shooting - or even a piece of string and a bottlestop,' says Clayton Hickman, the 26-year-old editor of *Doctor Who* magazine. His circulation: it currently hovers at around 30,000. He tells me, on the radio: 'They're like lapdog Christians. They're all coming back.'

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harks back to the days when the series was written by its creator, Terry Noonan, inventor of the dials. Tamm died in 1994, even Douglas Adams (True fans see all sorts of writers' influence in play in *Doctor Who*, from Asimov to John Wyndham, to them, the show is anything but lowbrow.

THE NEXT DAY I sneak into the BBC for a private viewing. What can I tell you? It is very nice, with some good lines and snigger moments. There is a great bit about the Millennium Wheel. I enjoy it, but it is not, and never will be - how shall I put this? - *Doctor Who*. I hear the theme music and my stomach flaps. But then Christopher Eccleston appears, looking dour in his leather jacket, and with an overwhelming sense of loss. I decide that the only way of dealing with this is to go home and watch a DVD I have bought to help me see this piece: *The Robots of Death*, starring Tom Baker. But this is no help at all. How slow the whole thing is, and how silly the robots look in their Camilla Parker Bowles-like green quilted jackets. Their spaceship, moving slowly across a strange planet, looks like a Dinky toy being pushed through a sand pit. A human is murdered. The mark of his death? A small red rover, exactly like one I had as a boy on the rear mudguard of a bicycle. Is stuck to his hand. Good grief.

In some ways, Baker has never been a



better time to bring back *Doctor Who*. Awash with conspiracy theories, suspicion is so thick that CCTV cameras our guardians' genetic engineering our future. If you mistrust various aspects of the world, the way it's run, the increasing population, the dirt, the illness, the concealed misery - then you find consolation in science fiction. says the writer Brian Aldiss.

Perhaps, then, Russell T. Davies will find an audience. But these viewers must be young. They must know nothing of Gallifrey or Exilium or Rary; they must see the autons and the dials with new eyes. Anyone with precious memories - obsessive fans - excepted. It probably does not go far as the timelier's snail incarnation goes. Then again, as *The Robots of Death* forever reminded me, the past is not always what you think, and little is to be gained by yawning at it.

Before Christmas, when it became clear that my father's cancer was in its final stages, my brother went out and bought a *Doctor Who* DVD for all to watch together. Dad was too ill, and the box went unopened. At the time, I cried about this, yet another injustice. Now I know better. Some things in life can't ever be retrieved - an enjoyment of green robots in sequels and postal pushers being one of them.

Dick courtesy of www.earthandunderground.com

The Observer reader offers an angelic's oratorios

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THE WHO'S WHO OF DOCTOR WHO

WILLIAM HARTNELL 1963-1966
The first *Doctor* to be named in the *Doctor Who* - originally only 13 episodes of the series were commissioned - but he ended up traveling to Mars and China. He was the first to be named in the *Doctor Who* - originally only 13 episodes of the series were commissioned - but he ended up traveling to Mars and China. He was the first to be named in the *Doctor Who* - originally only 13 episodes of the series were commissioned - but he ended up traveling to Mars and China.

THE WHO'S WHO OF DOCTOR WHO

PETER DAVIDSON 1967-1968
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THE WHO'S WHO OF DOCTOR WHO

JOHN PERTWEE 1970-1974
The first *Doctor* to be named in the *Doctor Who* - originally only 13 episodes of the series were commissioned - but he ended up traveling to Mars and China. He was the first to be named in the *Doctor Who* - originally only 13 episodes of the series were commissioned - but he ended up traveling to Mars and China.

THE WHO'S WHO OF DOCTOR WHO

CHRISTOPHER ECCLESTON 2005
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