

THE MAN IN THE BOX

Fifty years of Doctor Who.

BY JILL LEPORE

Behind the door labelled Studio Four, where "Doctor Who" is filmed, it smells of glue and paint. Industrial-gauge steel chains hang from the ceiling, which is painted black and is so impossibly high that it feels more like a night sky than like the underside of a roof, the chains like falling stars. The only light is artificial, slanted, and green. The concrete floor is speckled and spattered. Surrounding the set, cameras, lights, and microphones stand on tripod legs of smeared chrome like an army of giant arthropod invaders, patiently waiting. In the stillness, a stagehand wearing a black hooded sweatshirt and black cargo pants rummages through a Tupperware storage box, making an awful clatter. He pulls out something metal and rusted, cradling in his tattooed hands the part that would roll away if you were to guillotine a robot. "This, this," he mutters in quiet triumph, "is the head we need."

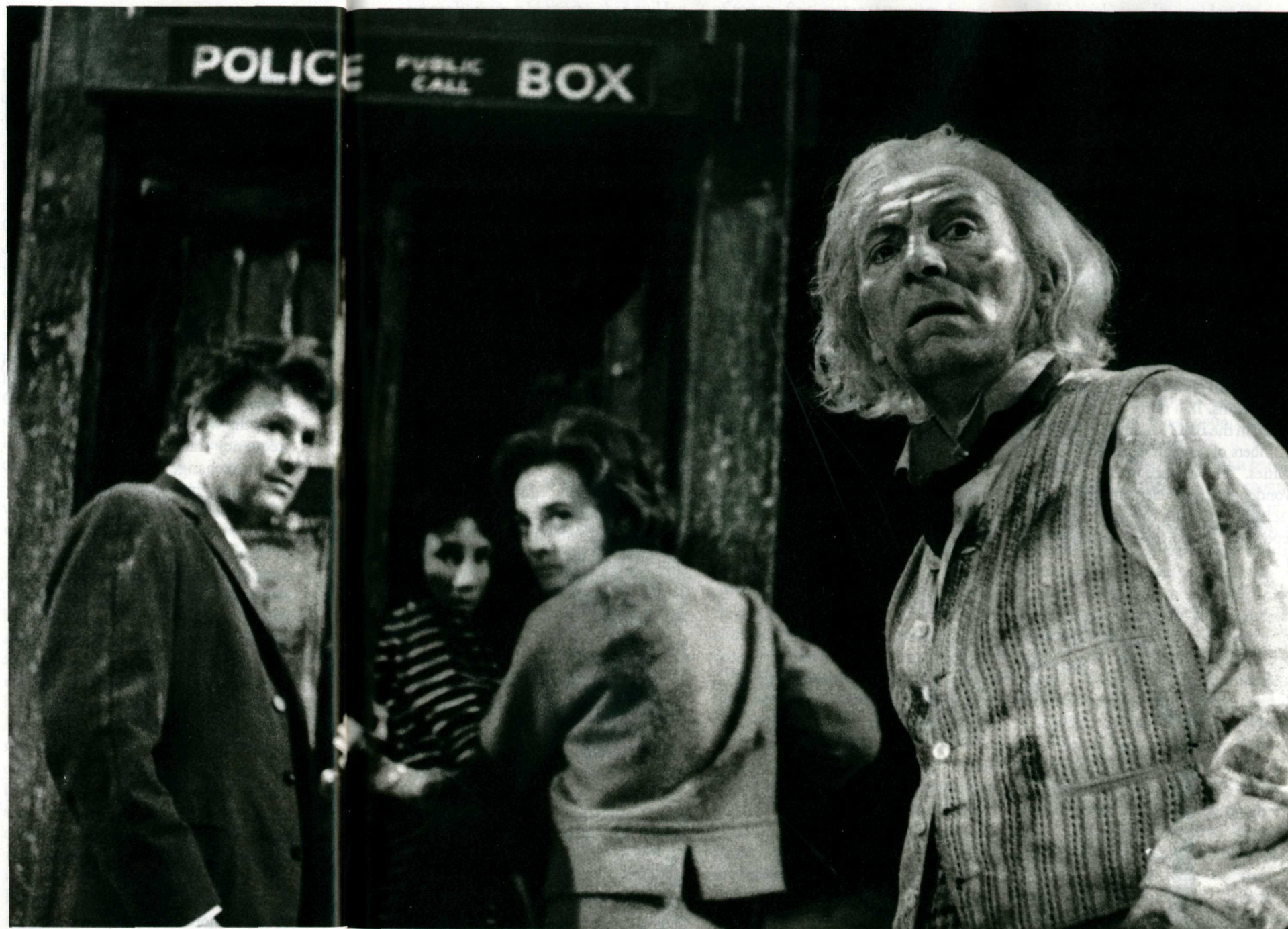
"Doctor Who" is the most original science-fiction television series ever made. It is also one of the longest-running television shows of all time. (Virtually every other marathoner is a soap opera.) It was first broadcast in 1963, three years before "Star Trek," and, with apologies to Gene Roddenberry, is smarter and, better yet, sillier. The U.S.S. Enterprise, for all its talking computers and swooshing doors, is a crabbed and pious Puritan village; Doctor Who tumbles through time and space in the Tardis, a ship that from the outside looks like an early-twentieth-century British police box, painted blue and bearing a sign on its door that reads "POLICE TELEPHONE. FREE FOR USE OF PUBLIC. ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE OBTAINABLE IMMEDIATELY." Inside (it's bigger on the inside), the Tardis has something of the character of the reading room of the British Library, if the British Library had a swimming pool and were a pub designed by someone who adored Frank Gehry,

Lewis Carroll, and typewriters with missing keys.

On November 23, 2013, "Doctor Who" will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary with a seventy-five-minute, 3-D special called "The Day of the Doctor," which BBC Worldwide is billing as a "global simulcast," meaning that it will be seen at the same time in almost eighty countries—a new frontier in the history of television. For many people around the world, "Doctor Who" is the face of the BBC. At the height of its first run, which ended in 1989, "Doctor Who" was seen by a hundred and ten million viewers in fifty-four nations, including the United States, where, beginning in the nineteen-seventies, it was broadcast by PBS and watched by the kind of quivering American kid who hadn't the heart for "Happy Days."

"Doctor Who" is the story of a lovely world in which a kind man saves everyone from harm," Steven Moffat says. Moffat, a fifty-one-year-old Scot, started watching "Doctor Who" when he was a little boy and is now its executive producer and head writer. He says that it has two things: "scary monsters and a funny doctor." Every week, it's the same: the Tardis lands; the funny doctor pops out; he meets scary monsters; and then he defeats them, because he is very, very clever.

From the start, "Doctor Who" was meant to be a "loyalty program," a show that people reliably tune in to every week. Lately, TV people schedule around what is known as "event television," and it's not necessarily a weekly affair; instead, it's often a one-off, like the instant-to-Internet Netflix release, earlier this year, of all thirteen episodes of the first season of the American adaptation of the BBC's "House of Cards." "Doctor Who" began as family television: a show that kids and their parents and grandparents can all watch, maybe even together, on the sofa. But the in-



A scene from the first season of "Doctor Who," in

1963, with William Hartnell as the Doctor, outside the Tardis, his time-and-space ship.

dusty term "3G TV" doesn't mean television enjoyed by three generations of your family; it means television you can watch on a mobile telephone with third-generation wireless data service. "Doctor Who" is BBC Worldwide's top-selling iTunes download. In the United States, "Doctor Who" airs on BBC America, but here and around the world viewers watch the series on platforms that defy programming schedules and that don't require families or sofas, or even TVs.

The fiftieth anniversary of "Doctor Who" marks an end to an era in the his-

tory of television: the end of the age of the box. In 1999, when "Doctor Who" was off the air (if thriving in fan fiction) Moffat wrote a spoof called "Doctor Who—The Curse of Fatal Death," starring everyone from Rowan Atkinson to Hugh Grant, in which one character tells the Doctor, "You're like Father Christmas, the Wizard of Oz, and Scooby Doo!" But Doctor Who is also Great Britain. The world's longest-running science-fiction television series is, among other things, a fable about British history: the Doctor halts every inva-

sion and averts every atrocity, except when he can't. Doesn't that story ever get old?

"An Unearthly Child," the first episode of "Doctor Who," was broadcast—live, in black-and-white—from a BBC studio in London on November 23, 1963, one day after John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas. The BBC had never before done anything like it.

"Doctor Who" was the brainchild of Sydney Newman, a Canadian who became head of the BBC's drama depart-

ment in 1962. Newman, who'd created "The Avengers," for ITV, in 1961, was brought in to produce television that could meet the BBC's remit as a government-owned broadcasting service as well as its need to win viewers from ITV, a commercial rival that had begun broadcasting in 1955. By 1960, the BBC had not a single program among the top ten ratings earners. Newman had an idea for something that could be both educational and entertaining: science fiction. His department commissioned a report on the state of the genre. It proved

discouraging. "Several facts stand out a mile," the report began. "The first is that SF is overwhelmingly American in bulk." Also, "SF is not itself a wildly popular branch of fiction—nothing like, for example, detective and thriller fiction." In particular, "It doesn't appeal much to women." Then, too, "SF is largely a short story medium," in which, as Kingsley Amis had pointed out, the heroes are ideas, not people, and the ideas are often "so bizarre as to sustain conviction only with difficulty over any extended treatment." In other words: adapting for television an existing work of science fiction was impossible and hiring any science-fiction writer inadvisable.

Newman decided to flout the genre's conventions. In a flurry of memos (now stored in the BBC's archives in Reading), members of his staff explored the possibilities. "The essence of S.F. is that the wonder or fairytale element shall be given a scientific or technical explanation," one reported. "To do this there must be at

least one character capable of giving the explanation." It might not be a bad idea if this character were to have something "of the feeling of Sherlock Holmes." But, if so, he ought to have a female Watson, because "S.F. is deliberately unsexual; women are not really necessary to it"—and so it would be wise to "add feminine interest."

A time machine was first suggested at a meeting held on March 26, 1963. From an educational point of view, this device had a significant advantage: a hero who travels through time and space can offer lessons in both history and science. "Doctor Who" is distinctly British, and indebted to H. G. Wells. It was also influenced by the 1951 Hollywood film "The Day the Earth Stood Still," in which an alien who travels with a shiny metal robot lands a flying saucer on the Washington Mall, in the hope of ending war on Earth. But the series, as it developed, was meant to appeal to women as much as to men, to adults as much as to

children, and to revolve around a hero who is a fully realized dramatic character, not a disembodied idea. A flying saucer was proposed and rejected. "Bug-Eyed Monsters" and "Tin Robots" were discouraged (a suggestion not always honored). And a narrative structure was adopted that allows not only for extended but for infinite treatment.

Newman hired Verity Lambert as a producer. He'd worked with her on ITV's acclaimed *Armchair Theatre* (a forerunner of PBS's *Masterpiece*). Lambert was the only female producer of television drama at the BBC, and, at twenty-seven, also the youngest. She cast a fifty-five-year-old character actor named William Hartnell as the Doctor. (He never gives his name. "Doctor Who" was meant to sound groovy: the first James Bond film, "Dr. No," had just been released.) To play the doctor, Hartnell wore long white hair, a ribbon tie, a striped waistcoat with a watch fob, a dark cloak, a streaming white scarf, and, on top of his head, a black hat that, according to a recent BBC America blog post titled "How to Dress Like the First Doctor," "looks a little like a tea cosy."

Hartnell's doctor, mincing and fusty, was more Micawber than Holmes, more Dickens than Conan Doyle. The Doctor was supposed to be hundreds of years old, and it was important that Hartnell look and act antique, so that the Doctor's relationship with his travelling companion, a spunky, wide-eyed teen-age girl, would be unimpeachable. (Another long-standing "Doctor Who" dictum: No hanky-panky in the Tardis.) To this end, it was also decided that the girl ought to be the Doctor's granddaughter.

Most of what works best in "Doctor Who" comes out of ancient forms of serial historical writing, from the *Odyssey* to the Old Testament. The Doctor and his granddaughter are part of a diaspora. "We are not of this race," he explains. "We are not of this Earth. We are wanderers in the fourth dimensions of space and time, cut off from our own planet and our own people."

The first episode of "Doctor Who" opens in present-day London. "An Unearthly Child" begins with a bobby walking down a foggy street. He enters an abandoned warehouse; he finds a police box. Title credits then dissolve to a school

where Barbara, a history teacher, and Ian, a science teacher, are puzzled by one of their students, fifteen-year-old Susan: she knows a great deal more about history and science than they do. Following her home after school, Barbara and Ian discover that Susan lives with her grandfather inside the police box.

Why a police box? It was bizarre. It needed explaining. "Therefore here is some phoney science," one of Lambert's staff wrote, offering the sort of gobbledygook you'd come across in an Arthur C. Clarke story: "The outside appearance of the machine is a police box because when the machine is made and before it goes critical it is given an anchor in a definite age and space, without which there can be neither past nor future, and the time/space traveler would go mad—or meet God." Lambert let that pass. Instead, she has the Doctor and Susan explain that the Tardis is supposed to change its shape to blend in with the local surroundings but that its chameleon circuit is broken, so it's stuck being a police box. The real problem, it was widely believed, was that Lambert's production budget could not possibly accommodate building a new ship for every adventure.

That's how the Tardis got stuck as a police box, but it doesn't explain why it started out that way. That explanation may lie in the history of policing. Beat policing is a British invention. British police are called bobbies because the London Metropolitan Police, a model for police forces all over the world, was created by Home Secretary Sir Robert (Bobby) Peel, in 1829. Doctor Who polices worlds. The idea of a world's policeman dates to the First World War and began to come into common usage near the end of the Second. In 1943, during a birthday dinner for Winston Churchill, F.D.R. called upon the allied powers—the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China—to serve as the world's "four policemen." In 1945, the four policemen became the United Nations Security Council.

"Doctor Who" is, unavoidably, a product of mid-twentieth-century debates about Britain's role in the world as its empire unravelled. It is also one of the stranger means by which British culture has reckoned with the horrors of the Second World War, the apocalyptic doomsaying of the Cold War, and the lasting madness

of twenty-first-century terrorism. Superman, who first appeared in 1938, thwarted gangsters and thugs and criminal masterminds. But Doctor Who, created in the postwar, postcolonial, atomic age, inherited the agony of helplessness: he believes he can use his power to travel through time and space to undo unspeakable slaughter, only to find that, very often, he cannot. "Imagine you were in Pompeii and you tried to save them but in doing so you make it happen," he says, trying to explain to a woman who is about to die in a nuclear explosion that he is powerless to prevent it. "Everything I do just makes it happen." (He tries anyway. Moments after he saves her life, she kills herself.)

"Doctor Who" is a chronicle of the impossibility of rescue. Yet it contains within it both a liberal fantasy about the heroism of the West in opposing atrocity and a conservative politics of self-congratulation, which, in the end, amount to the same thing. "You act like such a radical," an alien said to the Doctor, not long ago, "and yet all you want to do is preserve the old order."

"Doctor Who" is also a TV show about TV: a fantasy about the bounds of fantasy. In "An Unearthly Child," after Susan's teachers force their way inside the police box, she explains that the Tardis—the name is her acronym for Time and Relative Dimension in Space—exists in a different dimension from the outside. When Barbara and Ian still can't understand how a box so small can contain so much, the Doctor instructs them by way of an analogy. "You say you can't fit an enormous building into one of your smaller sitting rooms," he points out, "but you've discovered television, haven't you?"

"Doctor Who" is no longer produced in London; it's produced at BBC Wales, in Cardiff. Roath Lock, a hundred-and-seventy-thousand-square-foot facility housing nine state-of-the-art studios, is one of the BBC's largest television-production centers. It opened last year. So did the Doctor Who Experience, a tourist stop next door: an all-in-one interactive entertainment center, museum, and gift shop in a building that, from the outside, looks like a giant blue tube of toothpaste. It is not bigger on the inside.

Roath Lock is "Doctor Who" H.Q. Its neo-faux-retro-Edwardian façade is a tribute to "Doctor Who" s hammy, psy-

chedelic kookiness. Its corridors are sized to accommodate, side by side, two Daleks, the half-robot, half-mutant monsters from the planet Skaro who have been stalking the Doctor since Lyndon B. Johnson strode the halls of the White House. And some of the building's porthole windows are frosted so that the fans can't see into the ground-floor cafeteria, where, I hereby report, actors dressed as the metallic cyborgs known as Cybermen can indeed be found eating Cornish pasties.

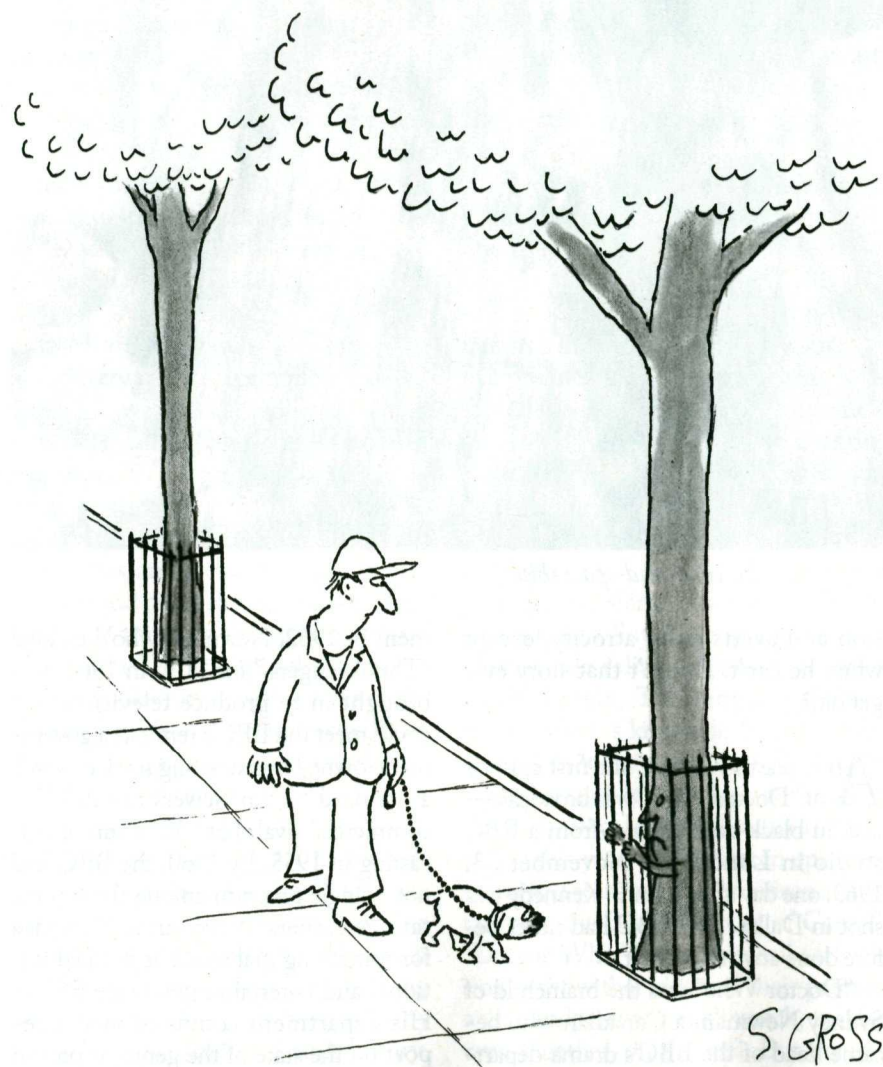
Backstage in the gloaming of Studio Four, four Cybermen have collapsed onto folding metal chairs, resting in between takes. They stretch their legs wide. They are very hot. An intern comes by with a fan, but the rotator is broken so he waves it around by hand. He announces, "I am the Oscillator-in-Chief."

I share a toolbox, by way of a bench, with Ailsa Berk, the show's choreographer. Berk has pale, spiky hair and rimless glasses and is so elegant and lithe that she looks as if she had pipe cleaners where her bones are supposed to be. She was an exoreptilian bounty hunter in "Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi." In "Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan," she played a female ape. For the BBC's "Chronicles of Narnia," she worked the animatronic Aslan. She arranges the choreography for most of the monsters in "Doctor Who." I ask which is her favorite. She thinks it over carefully.

"The Ood are very beautiful," she says. (The Ood are telepaths from the thirteenth century who have tentacles growing out of their noses and hold one of their two brains in their hands.) "And the scarecrows are very scary. Because it's something so familiar." (The scarecrows are scarecrows.) She leans closer. She whispers, "I don't do Daleks."

Upstairs and along the hall from Studio Four, I sit down with Steven Moffat in the Dalek Room, where the walls are papered with blueprints of the original Daleks. Moffat is wearing a black suit and a blue striped shirt. He has to do a lot of swanning about on behalf of "Doctor Who." Comic Con. The TV Choice Awards. Talk shows. This is how event TV works: buzz, buzz, tweet, tweet. "Every day here is a day away from writing," he complains to me.

Moffat is thickset and funny and full



of "Doctor Who" bluster. "In the history of all science fiction," he says, "the Dalek is the best alien that's ever been done. Everything else is just a guy in a suit."

The Daleks were invented by Terry Nation, who was born in Cardiff in 1930. His mother was an air-raid warden. In 1941, he survived the Cardiff Blitz. In 1955, he moved to London and started writing for the radio comedy program "The Goon Show." He took a job writing for "Doctor Who" in 1963. He once said that he got the name "Dalek" from an encyclopedia volume that ran from "dal" to "lek." He made that up. ("It's absolute rubbish," he confessed.) Really, he was just trying to think up a word that sounded super-creepy. He'd been through a blitz; he'd been close to people in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. He invented a race of creatures mutated by an apocalyptic nuclear war who, in order to survive, live inside robotic shells and are so convinced of their own purity that their object is to exterminate every other race.

"I've had this brilliant idea for some baddies," he said to his wife. "I'm going to call them Daleks."

She said, "Drink your tea while it's hot."

The original Daleks were designed by Raymond P. Cusick, who got the job when Ridley Scott, then a set designer at the BBC, left the corporation. Lambert had four monsters built and then tried them out in a car park, actors crouched inside, scooting along on hidden casters.

The Daleks made their first appearance in "Doctor Who" in a seven-part series that began on December 21, 1963. It attracted an average of nearly nine million viewers, catapulting "Doctor Who" into the top twenty rated programs. The first Daleks were about five feet high. They have no legs; instead, they're built of what look like shiny, polka-dotted skirts about the size and shape of the base of an industrial-grade floor-waxing machine. One arm looks like a plunger and the other like a whisk. If they weren't psychotic mutant alien murderers, a Dalek would be useful to have around the house, unclogging drains, scrambling eggs, and polishing the floors.

As the show was originally conceived, the Doctor could travel in three direc-

tions: to the past, to the future, and sideways (for instance, a parallel universe). The future was expensive. So was sideways. The past was cheap, especially when stock footage was available. "The Time Meddler" uses footage shot during a 1949 reenactment to show Vikings landing off the northeast coast of England in 1066. Also, at least originally, the history was meant to be real history and, because the science was nonsense, the educational value of "Doctor Who" derived almost entirely from its exploration of the past. The Time Meddler, who is disguised as a monk, is from Doctor Who's home planet (his Tardis, which has a functioning chameleon circuit, is disguised as a Saxon sarcophagus). Like the Doctor, the monk can't stand to see suffering. He would like to thwart the Norman Conquest.

"I want to improve things," he says.

"Improve what?" the Doctor asks.

"King Harold, I know he'd be a good king. There wouldn't be all those wars in Europe, those claims over France went on for years and years."

There's a fair bit of history here. But an audience survey reported that viewers found the historical episodes boring. One housewife said, "The sooner he gets back to the future the better."

The first installment of "Dalek Invasion of Earth" aired on November 21, 1964. It bound together a cherished national narrative about the Second World War—Britain is the last defense against totalitarianism—with panic-induced Cold War preparedness. In 1964, the



Home Service began broadcasting what was known as the Civil Defence Information Bulletin: seven short films about what to do in case of a nuclear attack. In "Dalek Invasion of Earth," the year is 2164; the Daleks roll all over a post-apocalyptic London, raising their plunger-arms in Third Reich salutes and screeching about the

Final Solution. More than twelve million people tuned in.

"Please, please will you tell us what happened in last Saturday's episode of Dr. Who," one letter in the BBC archives reads. "We were away from here & missed it. The Thorne Family." At Roath Lock, I had to sign a nondisclosure agreement to get past the Dalek who guards the door. Lambert had a different approach to

spoilers. When a little boy from Canterbury wrote that he was going to miss the end of "Dalek Invasion" because his family was going on holiday to America, Lambert wrote back, "I am sorry you are going to miss the end of 'DOCTOR WHO.' I cannot give you any detailed information on how it ends, but if you promise not to tell anybody..." And then she told him.

Soon there were Dalek costumes, stuffed Daleks, and blow-up Dalek beach toys. The Daleks went on tour. They visited Cardiff. "Thousands of children lined the route—12 deep at times," BBC Wales reported to Lambert. "The Beatles had nothing like this." Trading on Dalekmania, the BBC was able to sell "Doctor Who" to affiliates all over the world. By 1965, the show could be seen in places as far flung as Australia, Gibraltar, Singapore, Barbados, Sierra Leone, New Zealand, and Nigeria.

There have been complaints over the years that "Doctor Who" is too violent, and the Daleks, in particular, are too scary. Moffat finds this exasperating. "There's always this nonsense in which people say, 'Watch out because kids may not know it's not real!'" he says. "As if kids don't know what playing is." In 1964, a pint-size Dalek was the must-have Christmas gift. Children wrote to Lambert begging for Daleks to visit their birthday parties. Sometimes she sent them. One woman wrote, about her four-year-old son, "He was heartbroken last Saturday when they were all killed off." At the height of the Cold War, three years after Eichmann was tried in Jerusalem, while Britain prepared for an atomic day of doom, radiation-damaged Nazi robots became inflatable bath toys.

One reason that "Doctor Who" has spanned a half century is a casting trick written into the plot. When William Hartnell could no longer play the role, it was decided that the Doctor would be able to regenerate when he is on the verge of death, returning to life in another body. Between 1963 and 1989, seven actors played the Doctor. The show earned a cult following. A "Doctor Who" Appreciation Society was founded in 1975; a magazine called *The Doctor Who Weekly* began appearing four years later. In the nineteen-eighties, "Doctor Who" got campy; then it grew threadbare. By the time it went off the air, the production

THE LANDSCAPES OF VILHELM HAMMERSHØI

Between water reading itself a story
with no people in it

and fields, illegible, and a sky
that promises nothing,

least of all what will happen now,
are the trees

that do not believe in
any version of themselves

not even the one in which
they are apparently everyday trees

and not a sequence of wooden frames
for ordinary leaves.

—Vona Groarke

budget for an episode of "Doctor Who" was about a seventh of the budget for an episode of "Star Trek: The Next Generation." It showed.

But the fate of "Doctor Who" in the nineteen-eighties and nineties is characterized less by decline and disappearance than by preservation. By the time it began to look as though the series might be cancelled, video recorders had become available for home use. Nostalgic fans began trying to collect old episodes. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the BBC had customarily wiped tapes after broadcast. Collectors discovered that the BBC had sometimes made copies of the tapes first; these had been sent to the former British colonies, where they had not always been destroyed. "The Time Meddler" was found at a television station in Nigeria. At the urging of fans, the BBC began releasing old episodes, first on videocassette, next on DVD, and, finally, online. For the BBC, the archive has been a gold mine. Only last month—as part of the fiftieth-anniversary media blitz—the BBC announced that nine missing episodes from the late nineteen-sixties had been discovered. (Ninety-seven episodes remain at large.)

"Doctor Who" was cancelled in 1989. The series that began in 2005 is usually referred to as the "Doctor Who" "reboot." A trick, with a series that has an archive

of more than six hundred episodes, is that the next episode needs to be fun to watch even if you've never seen the show before. Moffat calls himself a "demented, hardcore fan," but he figures that the only possible thing he can do, as a writer, is to ignore people like him. "If we really hate it, we'll only watch it thirty-five times," he says. The audience that Moffat's really after has barely heard of "Doctor Who." He has told reporters, "The guy who wrote 'The Wire' said, 'Fuck the casual viewer.' And I understand that. The casual viewer cannot catch up with a show like that, or 'Breaking Bad.' He's a chemistry teacher? Huh?" But on a show like this, we want the casual viewer."

Moffat has been writing for "Doctor Who" since 2005, when the series was revived by Russell T. Davies, who read *The Doctor Who Weekly* as a kid. Davies cast, as the ninth doctor, Christopher Eccleston, who had played the Messiah in a TV mini-series that Davies wrote and produced called "The Second Coming." (The eighth doctor appeared in a TV movie in 1996.) Before "Doctor Who," Davies was best known for creating the series "Queer As Folk." (Conservatives worried that he would bring a "gay agenda" to the show.) The biggest change that Davies made concerns the Doctor's backstory. He decided that the Doctor's home planet had been destroyed by

Daleks in the Great Time War, leaving the Doctor the last of his race.

The rebooted "Doctor Who" has a different vantage on British history from the original. For a long time, Britain, like the rest of the world, paid not a great deal of attention to the slaughter of Jews during the Second World War. It isn't that no one reported on it; it's that there was a public-relations preference and a popular prejudice for depicting the victims as nonspecific. In 1945, when the British Ministry of Information hired Alfred Hitchcock to make a film about the extermination camps, he was instructed, in a memo, "It is especially desirable to document the extent to which non-Jewish German nationals were the victims of the German concentration camp system." (The film was never shown.) In the nineteen-sixties, after Eichmann's trial was widely reported, by, among others, Hannah Arendt in *The New Yorker*, "the Holocaust," as it was now called, became something of an American obsession. Not so in Britain, where, in 1961, even a small exhibit about the Holocaust in Coventry Cathedral proved controversial. In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, while the Holocaust became "the benchmark of oppression and atrocity" in the American imagination, as the historian Peter Novick has argued, it was largely ignored in the United Kingdom. The nineteen-nineties saw a reversal; schools in Britain became more dedicated to teaching the Holocaust than schools in the United States. But this schoolroom treatment often works the same way as that memo sent to Hitchcock: the story of the Holocaust becomes not the story of a particular people but everyone's story, an all-purpose atrocity.

The revival of "Doctor Who" makes that move as well. When Doctor Who, a character who operates as an allegory for Britain, becomes a remnant of a nearly exterminated race, a timeless atrocity is folded into the national narrative. Davies's Doctor is consumed by grief, regret, and compassion. In one episode, he meets a space pirate who has murdered the inhabitants of an ark, the last survivors of a doomed planet.

"Piracy and genocide," the Doctor says, grimly.

"Very emotive words, Doctor," the pirate says.

"I'm a very emotive man."

H. G. Wells used science fiction to

critique industrial-era class relations. A century later, a campaign of racial extermination became the go-to sci-fi plotline. The Tardis lands, the funny doctor pops out, and bears witness to genocide.

The first "Doctor Who" story that Steven Moffat wrote for Davies is "The Empty Child." The Tardis lands in London in 1941. The Doctor looks around. He makes a speech. "Right now, not very far from here, the German war machine is rolling up the map of Europe. Country after country, falling like dominoes. Nothing can stop it—nothing. Until one tiny, damp little island says, 'No, no. Not here.'" There's other trouble brewing. An alien spaceship, which turns out to be a medical-supply ship, has crashed nearby; a robotic cloud of nanogenes, attempting to save the life of a mortally injured little boy, have altered his DNA so that his face has become melded to the gas mask he was wearing when he was hit by a falling bomb. The boy-monster wanders the city asking everyone he meets, "Are you my mummy?" If you let him touch you, you become a monster, too. The Doctor fixes everything but he also fixes nothing: no one who has endured a blitz can en-



"This neighborhood has a strong sense of community that borders on siege mentality."

tirely take that gas mask off, ever again. "The Empty Child" is a haunting story about damage.

An acute tenderness toward children pervades Moffat's stories. (Moffat has two children at home.) Davies has said that the difference between his "Doctor Who" and Moffat's is that Moffat's stories are all about being a parent. I asked Moffat about that. "I'm good at writing about what I'm doing," he says. "I used to write about dating. Then about being married. I'm good at writing about what I'm doing. I don't say, 'I shall now do a giant space metaphor about what it's like to be a dad.'"

In "Blink," another story written by Moffat, the monsters are weeping angels, statues who come to life the second you close your eyes, send you back in time, and then, as the Doctor explains, "consume the energy of all the days you might have had." When the weeping angels steal the Tardis and send the Doctor back to 1969, he effects his rescue by making a video recording and sending it to the future. "Blink," which Moffat wrote not long after the 7/7 London bombings, might seem to lend itself to a reading about terrorism, sleeper cells, and surveil-

lance. Moffat says that "Doctor Who" never offers any commentary: "Doctor Who" is a fairy tale, and nothing more. "Our science is mad science," he insists. "Our history is mad history." If you keep your eyes shut.

Steven Moffat has got the icons of British genre fiction sewed up in his two pockets. The train ride from London to Cardiff lasts about two and a half hours; it was during that ride, while working for Davies, that Moffat and another "Doctor Who" writer, Mark Gatiss, got the idea of reviving Sherlock Holmes. "Sherlock," starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman, debuted in 2010. It is jointly produced by WGBH, in Boston, for Masterpiece, and, for the BBC, by Hartwood Films. Hartwood Films is run by Moffat's wife, Sue Vertue, and her mother, Beryl Vertue, who in the nineteen-sixties was Terry Nation's literary agent.

"'Sherlock' is 'Doctor Who' an hour later," Moffat likes to say. I asked him how he keeps the two characters separate in his head. They've even got a similar arch-nemesis. Moffat says that he has to pretend to be two writers, except that, really, he doesn't have to because—and here he cites Sydney Newman, because Steven Moffat is a crackerjack "Doctor Who" historian—Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Who are the same character: the Edwardian amateur. Their stories follow the same formula. Moffat loves the formula, and each of its rules. "Could there be a Bond film in which Bond does not go to M's office?" he asks. Moffat likes a hero who comes with plot constraints. "The best story ever told is the story of Clark Kent," he says. "He can do everything except this one thing: be with the woman he loves. Why don't they ever make the movie 'Kent'?"

There is no movie called "Kent" because American filmmakers prefer superheroes who remain changelessly invincible, the diminished status of the world's last superpower notwithstanding. Doctor Who, on the other hand, is a creature of history. Iraq and Afghanistan wound him. At Syria, he pauses. Should he really be meddling with time? He has begun to think that maybe he only ever makes everything worse. Financial meltdown, suicide attacks, chemical weapons, cyberwar. The more

vulnerable Britain, the more vulnerable the Doctor.

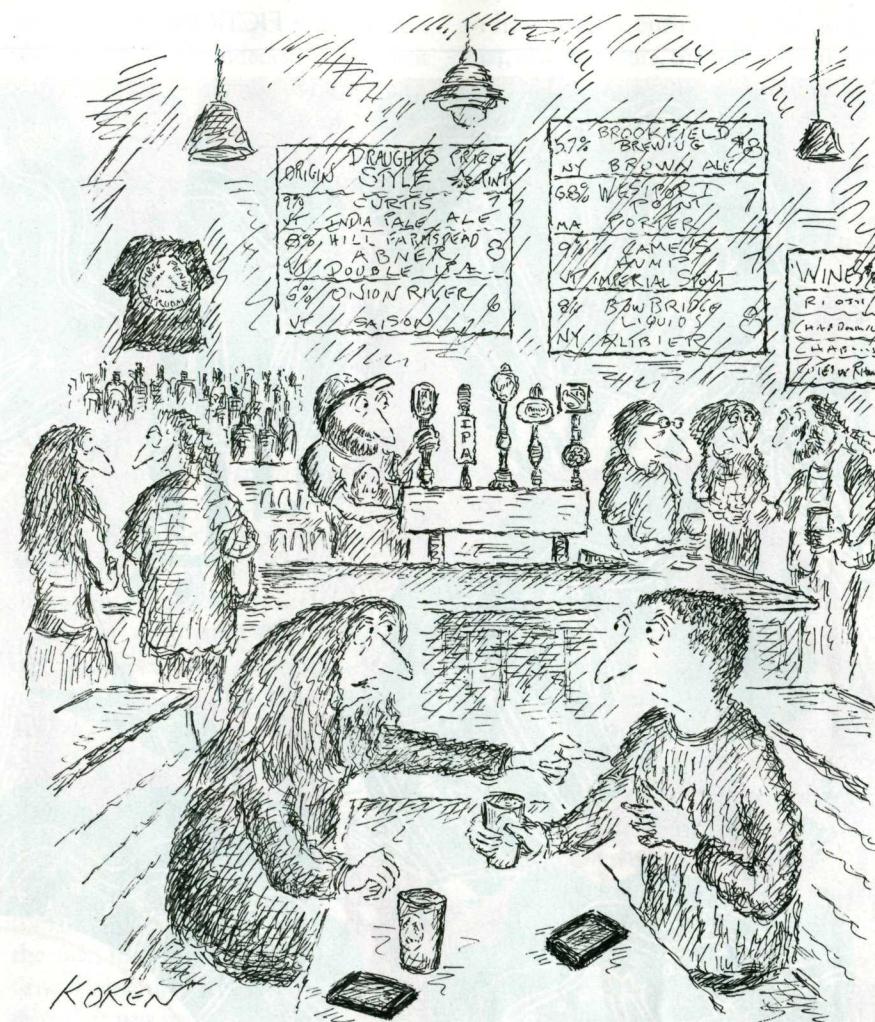
Lately, Moffat has been shooting stories in the United States. In "The Angels Take Manhattan," the Statue of Liberty is revealed to be a very scary monster from another planet. But there's no risk of "Doctor Who" becoming American. "This show is British," Moffat says. "We make a British show because we're British."

This summer, Moffat had to cast a new doctor. Christopher Eccleston left "Doctor Who" after one season. The tenth Doctor was David Tennant, who had played the lead in Davies's television series "Casanova." When Tennant left, Moffat, having taken over from Davies, cast Matt Smith as the eleventh doctor; Smith was twenty-seven when he started, making him the youngest doctor ever. Last spring, Smith said that he would not return. In August, the BBC announced that the twelfth doctor will be Peter Capaldi, best known for playing Malcolm Tucker in the British political satire "The Thick of It," a character he introduced to American audiences in the 2009 film "In the Loop."

Capaldi, at fifty-five, will be the oldest doctor since William Hartnell. He is the only actor Moffat auditioned. Moffat says, "He came round to my house. I made him coffee. And then he capered about, being the Doctor for a bit. It's not that you need to see if he can act. You want to see, Can 'Doctor Who' dialogue come out of that mouth?" Sure it can. Capaldi is tremendously talented. But Moffat has taken some guff for not casting a woman, and he's testy about it. He's also sick of hearing that nearly all of the Doctor's companions are a version of spunky fifteen-year-old Susan, from 1963, with her miniskirts and bobby socks and doe eyes, but they are. The latest companion, Clara Oswald (played by Jenna Coleman), could turn out differently; in some past, future, or other world—it's as yet unclear which—she's been transformed into a Dalek. She likes to say that everyone's an android now, anyway. In an episode aired and set in 2013, the Doctor discovers that aliens are using wireless Internet service to upload the contents of computer users' heads.

"Human souls trapped like flies in the World Wide Web!" he cries.

Clara shrugs. "Isn't that basically Twitter?"



"Is there an ex-wife somewhere in there?"

"The story of technology going bad really works as a 'Doctor Who' story," Moffat says. "I can get a scary robot out of that."

"Doctor Who" has been around for almost as long as there's been TV. "Oh, this is a brilliant year!" the Doctor announces as he bounds out of his box and gets his bearings in an episode written by Mark Gatiss. The Tardis has landed in London in 1953. The Doctor takes stock of the moment in time: "A nation throwing off the shackles of war and looking forward toward a happier, brighter future!" Nearby, inside a row house, a grandmother warns a boy about a newfangled machine known as a television: "I hear they rot your brains, rot them into soup, and your brain comes pouring out of your ears. That's what television does." Meanwhile, Mr. Mag-

pie, a TV salesman, is doing a brisk business because everyone is buying TVs to watch the coronation of the Queen. Mr. Magpie says, cheerfully, "We may be losing the Empire but we can still be proud!"

It turns out that Mr. Magpie is being controlled by a scary alien. And the TVs he's installing really are sucking people's brains out.

The Tardis is always broken. There's never a world policeman around when you need one. The Doctor can go anywhere in space and time. There is only one thing he cannot do. He cannot stop the killing.

Weeping angels have invaded Manhattan. People wear earbuds. Cybermen are coming, uploading, downloading. And we carry our televisions in our hands, like an Ood, cradling its second brain. ♦