

In Whovian Heaven

In Chicago, 'Dr. Who' Fans Have an Outer Space Weekend

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CHICAGO, Nov. 25—Five thousand strong, they beamed in here from all across America this weekend, vanguard of the outer-space set's newest, zaniest, brainiest cult.

Trekkies? Not on your life.

Whovians.

They knyt 15-foot hand-knit wool scarves (mostly knyt by Mama) and worship a being already five regenerations through his allowed 12 restorations. Despite this seemingly confusing state of affairs, Whovians gathered here demonstrated a fondness for each of the regenerations—and mercilessly hunted autographs from the four polished personifications that showed up.

For this was *the* year-end convention for Dr. Who, the durable, debonair man of many worlds who has starred in his own BBC television space adventure series since 1963. Organized by four Chicago-area men under an organization called Spirit of Light Enterprises Ltd., it drew Whovians willing to pay a \$50 registration fee for two days, or \$60 for the full three-day weekend of activities. It also drew four actors who have starred as Dr. Who and 11 other longtime players on the show to the Hyatt Regency O'Hare.

At seminars, round tables and endless bull sessions, the cultists delved into such important matters as Time and Relative Dimensions in Space—TARDIS!—and whether Daleks, those metallic beings that shriek "Exterminate! Exterminate!" at ev-

See DR. WHO, C4, Col. 4



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Patrick Troughton, right, the actor who played Dr. Who in the late '60s, with a fan at the Chicago convention.

'Dr. Who'

DR. WHO, From C1

ery opportunity, represent genuine dark forces in the unknown celestial realms traveled by the man they have come to regard as the most famous fictional doctor since Doolittle.

Once known only to British audiences, "Dr. Who" is being syndicated with increasing success in the United States. (It can be seen in the Washington area on Channel 32 at 11 weeknights.) The program is broadcast on about 80 American stations, according to "Dr. Who" producer John Nathan Turner. "We're on the verge of being a major cult . . . I guess you could say we're a large minicult."

"Hasn't quite reached the stage of Star Trek," said Terrence Dicks, former story editor.

"But we're seen in 54 countries, and by 110 million people around the world every week," rejoined Turner, a bearded 37 year old who has been producer for the past five years and spent a number of years before that in other behind-the-scenes "Dr. Who" jobs.

Although most of the U.S. stations airing the show are low-rated public broadcasting or UHF outlets, and the program frequently is burdened by time slots that seem more the work of the Daleks than of lovable, cuddly human program managers (11 on Sunday nights is not uncommon), "Dr. Who" is reaching an expanding audience. Like some infestation from beyond Pluto, the Whovian cult is expanding exponentially.

This is not difficult to understand. For anyone into computers, chess, phasers, telekenesis, "Star Wars" defenses, intergalactic conspiracy, mind-monsters, the seventh dimension, alternate realities, role-playing games, and similar fundamentals of life, "Dr. Who" has something to offer.

In other words, it's as American as cold, gray roast beef and overcooked veggies.

And also distinctly British. Each 25-minute show costs less than \$100,000 to produce, and the hero and his companions remain living creatures rather than technological creations of flashing lights, tinny voices and pneumatic whines—leave that to the Daleks and dozens of other terrifying bad guys invented over the past 21 years.

Perhaps nothing sums up the informality of the show than the device that is central to Dr. Who's space travels. He and his faithful female companion (who also has changed several times during the series), dial themselves around the universe via the TARDIS.

The warp machine is not a space ship, but a standard English public phone booth, or police box. Inside, by one of those dimension-penetrating



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"Dr. Who" fans at the convention celebrating 21 years of the British TV show.

miracles that only the space-travel set is fully equipped to understand, the TARDIS is the size of—a full television studio set!

It is this low-cost reliance on the brains and imagination of the viewers themselves that has made Dr. Who such a long-lived and endearing character. Filled with sly English humor that pokes fun at all the characters even as they face mortal perils, the show requires the suspension of disbelief essential to breathing life into fiction.

Beyond that, long before George Lucas brought us Darth Vader and the dark side of the Force, Dr. Who, a Time Lord himself, was grappling with the evil genius known as The Master—a renegade Time Lord who had turned against the domain of celestial order to wreak havoc wherever he could.

Part of the fun is that once hooked, a viewer has an almost endless amount of cult material to get into. For example, take the seemingly simple question of the doctor himself. Six actors have played him during the show's phenomenal run. Each actor brought his own personality and idiosyncrasies to the role, and the scripts reflected those differences. Aficionados at this convention had a ball savoring the differences among their different, yet similar, multiple heroes.

In the past five years, the cult has exploded in every direction, fueled in no small way by the many conventions of fans around this country. Now, there are "fanzines," comic books, instant novelizations of the best episodes, sound tracks and dozens of other items for sale. Larry Charet, one of Chicago's major comic

book dealers, said Dr. Who items now account for at least 20 percent of his business. "Five or six years ago, there was nothing at all."

Four of the Dr. Who regenerations were on hand here, all of them speaking the mother tongue in clipped British accents. They included Patrick Troughton, Dr. Who from 1966 to 1968; Jon Pertwee, the third doctor, 1968-74; Peter Davison, the fourth regeneration, who lasted through 1982-83; and the current Dr. Who, Colin Baker.

But because the syndicated episodes are running far behind the original, Americans are actually seeing shows now that feature the fourth doctor, Tom Baker, a gawky, antic man who came to life in 1974 and lasted until 1982, before being regenerated into the relatively short-lived Davison.

The conventioners here quickly zeroed in on Jon Pertwee, Dr. Who No. 3, as worthy of adulation and autograph. Pertwee was up to the challenge.

Smiling, bobbing his curly gray locks, he signed programs and photographs for clusters of young colonial autograph hounds. Even dressed in ruffled shirt and casual velvet jacket, sans the 15-foot scarf that is the Doctor's trademark, he was a center of attention from the beginning.

While he signed things and bantered with the fans, a grizzled American father at the reception desk across the lobby shook his head and coughed up cold cash to buy his daughter a convention ticket.

"Fifty bucks to see that!" grumbled papa, tossing a grimace in Pertwee's direction. "Unreal!"

Well . . . yes. And no.