

Speculative Realms

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2010

The Fifth Season of Doctor Who: A Doctor for the Soul

The Ham-and-Egger Review

By Gary Haden

It is the Christmas season in the UK and that can mean one of two things.

Father Christmas is coming to Town or ...

... Or the Doctor is going to return with one of his vaunted Christmas Television Specials.

The Doctor I speak of, of course, is Doctor Who, who—ha!—is in his Eleventh Hour, or, to be more precise, in his Eleventh incarnation in the person of **Matt Smith**, who took over the role of Doctor Who on the BBC earlier this year after a masterful run by **David Tennant**. The Doctor, an alien being known as a Time Lord who has a soft spot in his hearts for humans, especially humans from London or Cardiff or thereabouts, this time is accompanied in his space-time adventures by a flame-haired Scottish hottie by the name of Amy Pond, played by **Karen Gillan**, whose mini-skirts are a short version of the Star Trek sizzlers we used to see on **Nichelle Nichols**. *Short version!*



Karen Gillan and Matt Smith

That's short.

This year's Christmas extravaganza in the TARDIS features *A Christmas Carol*. I suppose that's fitting, being as how Mr. Dickens did make an appearance recently in the series. It should be interesting.

Full disclosure: I was a big, BIG fan of David Tennant.

I had also been a fan of **Christopher Eccleston**, who, along with writer-producer Russell T. Davies, had regenerated the Doctor from the cancellation bins of British Television History.

Well, then *HE* "regenerated" and then David Tennant came along and blew me away.

Now Tennant is gone and when he regenerated he said he didn't want to go!

I wept like a 250 pound baby.

I can't take this regeneration business. I don't know how you Brits stand it. What is going to happen when Matt Smith goes? I'd like to know before I commit. I can't take all this loss.

No, just kidding. In fact, I just got done watching Smith's first season as the Doctor. The Fifth Season of what has been dubbed the *Modern Doctor Who* has been transferred to disc and it is well worth checking out.

To be quite frank, I wasn't so sure of that after seeing the first disc.

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What problems there were did not involve the Doctor's new companion. The Doctor is a lonely time traveler and he tends to like having people tag along with him to break the monotony. The role of the Companion in the series is almost as prestigious as the role of the Doctor and is at least as important.

Karen Gillan is quite boisterous in her role as Amy Pond. She posted an appearance in the Tennant Era as a Soothsayer in *The Fires of Pompeii*. The make-up committee painted her face in that episode, which was like a doggie soiling a Botticelli, but that's ok.

Her Amy Pond puts one in mind of [Donna Noble](#), another feisty Who Redhead, played back in the day by the ridiculously talented [Catherine Tate](#). Amy Pond is committed to putting the Doctor in his place. What place would that be? Preferably, her bed for a bit of shagging.

Where the sexual tension between the Doctor, [Rose Tyler](#), and [Martha Jones](#), two of his other companions from the Tennant Era, was labored over, ultimately resulting in Martha's frustration and Rose securing herself a Doctor clone, Amy Pond wasted no time attempting to get the Doctor into her bed. She openly lusts after the Doctor, with her deep dark eyes, when he has to disrobe in front of her in one episode.

She doesn't quibble and is not self-conscious. She is a virtual Vampire in her sexual confidence.

The tricky part is that Amy is scheduled to marry Rory when she gets back from partying with the Doctor. Rory, like Mickey with Rose Tyler, has to become a companion himself to get any face-time with her.

The Eleventh Doctor is a decent, Tory type of chap, with lashings of Sylvester McCoy, a conservative, bow-tie wearing computer geek, some say a commentary on Gary McKinnon, and he just doesn't want to let Amy relax that frenetic uptightness of his. After all, it is a kid's show. The Doctor can't be shagging every companion he comes across.

(Although between you and me, Blokes, how the Doctor could turn down Martha Jones and snog [Captain Jack Harkness](#) boggles the mind!)

Amy Pond's kind of an emotionally complicated gal and she makes an interesting companion for the Doctor.

People familiar with the Doctor Who Series know that the Doctor, from time to time, undergoes a transformation, regenerating his body, completely altering his appearance. It is a jarring experience for the viewer, especially if she has grown accustomed to a certain visage of the Doctor and the particular way in which he is portrayed by the actor playing him at the time.

A problem arises when someone new takes over.

That problem is accentuated when the actor playing the Doctor has just completed a virtuoso performance, deserving of several applause-induced encores. That was a difficulty faced by the series before, when Tom Baker ended his run. There are Bakerites still today who scoff at the notion that there could be any other definitive Who. I think the subsequent Doctors suffered a bit from his shadow.

And everyone, I suppose, has their favorite Doctor as everyone has their favorite Uncle. But the fact is, Dave Tennant did no one any favors with his run. In fact, his performance had retroactive effects, at least for me. I thought Chris Eccleston was a fantastic Doctor. But Tennant wiped the TARDIS floor with him.

At the time he and [Russell T. Davies](#) brought the Doctor back after a prolonged absence from British Childhoods, Eccleston inspired me to investigate the Good Doctor's history and place all the old shows on backorder on Netflix to see just what these Brits were so crazy about.

I had seen a Tom Baker series a long time ago, hosted by one of the TV Horror Hosts I used to follow. I was always a sucker for mind-altering experiences back then. It was quite something to have your late night sleep-wake transition populated with a little Theremin and Doctor Who's hypnotic stare. But I never thought much of it. And the Daleks made really obnoxious noises.

Then I stumbled upon all the hullabaloo on the Net about the Doctor coming back and so I thought, what the hell? When it comes out on DVD, I'll see what the Doctor is up to these days.

That hooked me.

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But then something happened or it didn't, depending on who you consult. Chris Eccleston may or may not have had a falling out with Davies. Maybe he wanted to make movies. Maybe he didn't. But the shock of it was, Eccleston was out as Doctor Who. The transformation would take place after only one season.

Insert the double-take. To quote the Doctor: What? What? What?!?!)

Every time this happens, every time this transfiguration takes place, as a Who fan, you've got to wonder, what happens if the New Doctor irreparably stinks? It is almost as if the audience were being constantly placed in a method-acting kind of situation where there has been a death. But will there be a rebirth? There is a kind of Hindu marketing scheme writ into the fabric of Doctor Who where you are placed in an existential vortex wondering if you're going to be reincarnated or if it's all just pitch black nothingness in the dung heap of BBC cancellations.

At times, human beings face pressure to perform that is just galactically insurmountable. When you do Doctor Who as an actor it is the same as doing James Bond. There are others who have done the role before you who were, quite frankly, masters at it and if you aren't up to snuff people will know.

David Tennant came on the scene and proceeded to unceremoniously blow people away. His work on Who parallels Daniel Craig's on Bond, especially when you consider the incredible pressure both actors were under. Successful rendition of a beloved character depends heavily on an actor's ability to aggressively claim the role as his.

As in Craig's case with Bond, Mr. Tennant's tenure as Who was astounding enough to cause fans to wonder if he was the best Doctor Who ever. I don't wonder myself. He was the best Doctor Who ever by a wide margin. I don't care what you Tom Baker lovers say.

That said, when you watch Matt Smith, understand the precedent under which he labors.

In the early going, he does not appear up to it.

Look, there was talk he was aping Tennant's verbal delivery and mocking his energy, but there are qualities of the Doctor, the character, that are staples. One staple trait of the Doctor is that he gets speedy at times and rifles through his verbal deliberations like a kid tearing through presents on Christmas Day.

Matt Smith is very speedy at times. He's speedier even than the mercurial Tennant, who had greased lightning for a tongue. He gets too speedy at times and he sounds like he's mumbling. And when Ms. Gillan gets sultry, she seeps into some mumbling herself.

When he is in manic catatonia and she is in sultry seductiveness you have to turn on the subtitles.

The transition was rough.

Smith could have been better helped in the transition by the writing in the first few episodes. I mean, look, Dave Tennant and Russell T. Davies had audience anxieties over the Christopher Eccleston departure to inspire them and it was ingenious on their part, and advantageous for Tennant as far as gaining the sympathies of the audience goes, that they chose to hole the Doctor up in bed for the better part of Tennant's first episode, creating this huge conflict in the viewer over whether he, Tennant, was going to suck or not. What psychological capitalization! The franchise was bed-ridden for 45 minutes. And then?



Boom!

"The earth is defended!"

There wasn't a similar facility afforded to Mr. Smith.

The writing did not help Smith differentiate clearly enough from Tennant in the early going and he seems to be trying to gain some

footing there.

Of course, is it him or is it the trauma, inherent in every Doctor Who transformation,

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of losing your favorite Doctor? You have to figure in some denial. Denial is a part of the grief process and we've just lost a superb Doctor. It is quite natural to want to deny Matt Smith an opportunity to please us.

It was surprising in a way because the new head man of Doctor Who, Steven Moffat, is quite simply one of the most decorated sci-fi writers of all time. If you're from here, which means the States, and you want to get a hold of the quality Moffat brings to the table, think Harlan Ellison without all the litigiousness. Moffat has Nebulas, Hugos, BAFTAs—he's got some chops.

But be of good cheer, Who Fans, I bring you tidings of great joy!

The writing was not going to cripple Smith for long. And it most assuredly didn't.

Smith, who at different times reminds one either of a skeletonized Michael Palin or a male version of Juliet Stevenson, started to win me over in the sparse episode entitled *Vincent and the Doctor*. In it you get more of a sense of Smith's emotional range and you begin to get the impression, which I think Moffat has talked about, of a prudish old man inhabiting a young man's body. That sets up a peculiar kind of psychology to play with and it is fascinating to watch. It is counterintuitive and that is what is needed in science fiction in order to produce mindblowing moments.

This is a kind of an angelic Doctor, in an almost *Touched By the Doctor* sort of way. Oh, I know the Doctor is always helping people out, but here the Doctor seems to be using that sonic screwdriver of his to do a bit of psychological mechanicking, getting people unstuck, helping them toward their destinies, reminding them of what is important, steering them to self-realization.

Because, though we don't know WHO the Doctor is, he certainly knows who we are and he does everything he can to clear things up for us. This young-professor Doctor has done his homework. He knows his patients.

Dave Tennant had some of that, but his narrative was about full exploration of the heartrending loneliness of the Doctor. The irony was here was a man with many lives who just wanted a life!

The New Doctor is a kind of primary care physician of the soul.

It is this aspect of the Doctor that Matt Smith handles magnificently. He does it with subtlety and a dash of comic flair. Though he is speedy, he slows down when he needs to. He proves adept at handling touchy, intimate moments with people, and these are people with character traits as diverse as Amy Pond, Winston Churchill, and Vincent Van Gogh.

It wouldn't be surprising to find Steven Moffat and Matt Smith taking the Doctor into some touchy areas people don't really want to go and pulling it off.

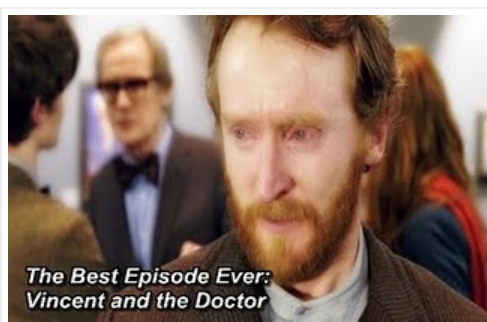
Matt Smith could be the first Hard Sci-Fi Doctor as a result. In terms of psychological complexity, as a matter of fact, Moffat Era Doctor Who could be the first Hard Sci-Fi Doctor Who Series. A kind of sober, sparse, efficient, elegant, psychologically complex sort of show. Speckled with a few Dalek spectaculars, of course.

It doesn't hurt that Head Writer Moffat, like Davies before him, has an Internet full of websites devoted to inspecting every nook and cranny of the Doctor Who Universe. If a Cyberman forgot to wear his helmet in the third minute of episode 21 of season six point three, there are a hundred pages of text posted somewhere on the web expostulating on what went wrong.

He'd been shagging the properties manager!

What Modern Doctor Who has that Cro-magnon Doctor Who did not is a writing staff consisting of roughly the entire UK online community. If you make a mistake you'll know it. And one of those forums is going to have an interesting story idea or two.

It is difficult to do Hard Sci-Fi for children but Moffat may accomplish that here. Steve Moffat has swallowed a few bitter pills in his day and it comes out in his stories. His work is dense and dark and emotionally intelligent. That makes him Hard Sci-Fi in my book.



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MONSTERTAI K

That's [Tony Curran](#) as Van Gogh

I know the Who Fan

Base generally love the New Incarnation and they gush about it being the Best Doctor Who ever. That's because they love the Doctor and they want him to stick around. But you will find a few episodes in these 13 that are very good indeed.

In fact, one, [Vincent and the Doctor](#), is the best Doctor Who Episode I've ever seen. It deserves Nebula, Hugo, and BAFTA mention, if not an Emmy nod. It was superb.

What better way to do a Doctor Who Series than to create a Doctor that entertains you as a child and involves you intellectually and emotionally when you are all grown up. That has been Moffat's modus operandi and we will have him to thank if Modern Doctor Who achieves a timelessness worthy of the Time Lords.

Who do you think should, or should have, played the Doctor? Here are a few of my picks:

Benedict Cumberbatch, who's now doing Moffat's Sherlock
David Oyelowo, The First Black Doctor
Elton John, preferably in the 70s
Patrick Stewart, we need a series with an older Who
Ian McKellen, it is neck and neck between McKellen and Stewart as to who the Grand Old Man would be
Sean Connery, The Doctor has always had a place in his heart for Scots
Ian McShane, his voice alone should employ him; a good Radio Doctor? Or should he play the Master?
Derek Jacobi, could have done it young, middle aged, and could do it as an old man
Timothy Dalton, yes, even though he's already played a Time Lord
David Bowie, Ziggy Stardust and the Doctor: Redundant?
Malcolm McDowell, he's got time travel on his resume
David Warner, he's also got time travel on his resume
Kenneth Branagh, A Radio Doctor if there ever was one
Dawn French, you know there is a female Doctor on the way and the Vicar would do it justice (besides, she knows Sue Vertue)
Catherine Tate, why the Doctor Donna, of course!
Gillian Anderson, she's a UK resident, right?

Actually, I think the BBC ought to do one-show Doctors. You could let one-run Doctors do the Specials. That way we get to see more takes on the Doctor.

But a Radio Doctor would be good, too.

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Posted by Gary Haden at 10:11 AM

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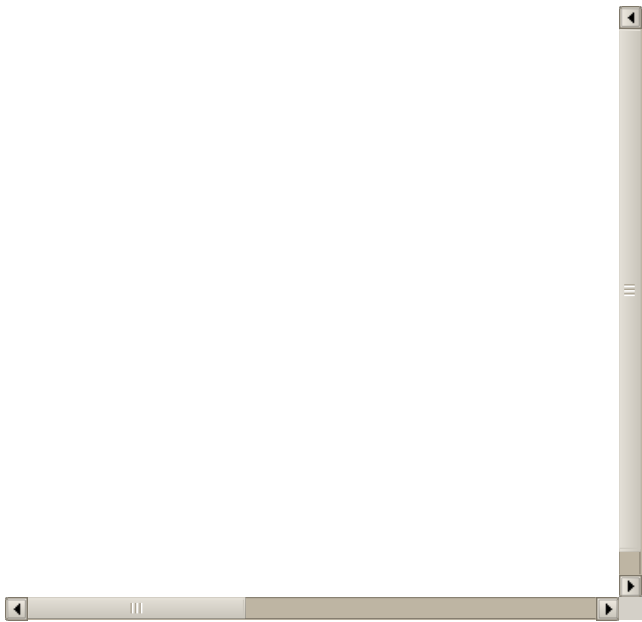
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