

Doctor Who and History

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Carey Fleiner and Dene October, eds. *Doctor Who and History: Critical Essays on Imagining the Past*. McFarland, 2017. Paperback. 224 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 9781476666563.

THE television show *Doctor Who*, which originally debuted in 1963 and was created by Sydney Newman, has had remarkable staying power. Though the show was off the air from 1989-2005 (apart from a TV film in the '90s), its time-hopping protagonist has journeyed via paperback, videogame, and audio series nearly continuously. The new volume edited by Carey Fleiner and Dene October, *Doctor Who and History*, explores history in the *Doctor Who* canon in three ways: the history of the series itself, how history is presented within the series, and the evolution of the teaching of history in tandem with the evolution of the television show. Drawing together both the historical context of the creation of the series, as well as the series' treatment of history itself, this volume fills an important lacuna in *Doctor Who* scholarship.

The original vision for *Doctor Who* was largely educational: these initial adventures, dubbed "pure-historical" in-house, would follow the Doctor through different historical eras with the intent to portray them at least somewhat accurately. The first part of *Doctor Who and History*, "Television as History: Inform and Entertain," examines this goal, comparing and contrasting the presentation of classical history in the schoolroom versus in "public history." Beyond merely addressing the role of history in the series, however, this first section reflects on how the series supported and reinforced British worldviews in the 20th century. This is highlighted most forcefully in Aven McMaster and Mark Sundaram's excellent chapter "'O tempora, o mores': Class(ics) and Education in *Doctor Who*," which examines the implications of the British model of teaching history on the aesthetic and storytelling choices made by the creators of the series.

This examination of the British education system carries over into part two of the collection, "Historical Drama: Genre and Conventions." Perhaps inevitably for a show predicated on a blend of SF and history, the series gradually forsook the "pure historicals" that emphasized a certain degree of fidelity to "what actually happened," in favor of pseudohistorical narratives. Ramei Tateishi uses the example of a 1966 Western serial in

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his chapter “History as Genre, Aesthetic and Context in ‘The Gunfighters’” to explore both the self-reflexivity and the rumination on the meaning of genre that took place during this transitional period of the series. Andrew O’Day, in “A Rude Awakening: Metafiction in Eric Pringle’s ‘The Awakening,’” takes the question of genre one step further: O’Day argues that the SF element of the later serials is quite obviously invented, and it is thus easier for the viewer to understand that it is “not genuine history.” As O’Day, and many others throughout the collection, note, *Doctor Who* is an excellent example of how history must always be both interpreted and mediated.

The third part of the volume, “Historical Constructions/Reconstructions,” examines mediated history taken one step further: alternate histories in the *Who* universe. Rhonda Knight’s chapter, “Playing with History: Terrence Dicks, Fans, and Season 6B,” examines the existence of counterfactuals within the *Who* universe, such as the alternate histories that transformed from “fanon” – stories created by fans – to *Doctor Who* canon created between the first and second parts of season 6. Knight also explores the alternate histories that *Who* creates, such as a history in which Germany won World War II or in which the Doctor prevents Winston Churchill’s assassination. Similarly, Karen Kellekson’s chapter highlights alternative histories entirely within the series’ own timeline and centered on the “What-Ifs” of the Doctor’s life.

The last section of the work, “History and Identity,” confronts the problematic British identity that informs every episode of the series. Peter Lowe explores the quintessential British village and its sinister implications in the series, arguing that these small-town English communities are Potemkin villages, a tranquil veneer barely concealing the malevolent forces that, in *Doctor Who*, are almost always taking refuge within. The collection ends with the insightful “*Doctor Who* and Environmentalism in the 1960s and Early 1970s,” in which Mark Wilson analyzes the role that television in general, and *Doctor Who* in particular, played in informing the British public about environmental issues.

Doctor Who has evolved from a show about history into a show that creates history. The series has confronted the great man theory of history time and again, often with seemingly-contradictory outcomes. And yet, as this volume of thought-provoking essays demonstrates, this is largely the point. Though the show was initially envisioned at least partially as a tool to educate the British public on past historical events, it has created a much larger conversation on the meaning of history itself. Through history and in creating history, *Doctor Who* has inspired both its viewers and its scholars to reexamine historical narratives with a critical eye to just who has decided what that narrative will be.