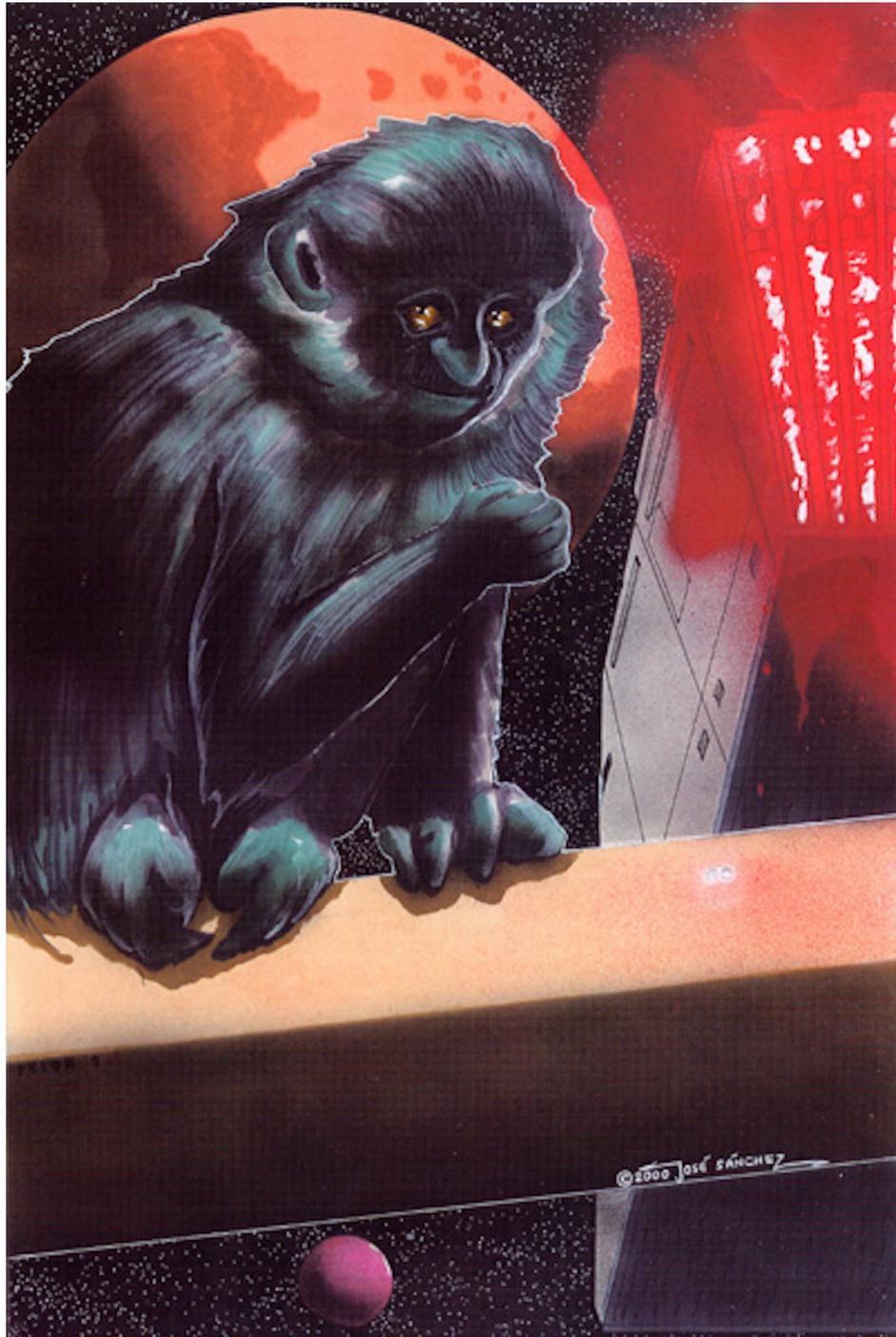


Tightbeam 302

November 2019



Perched by Jose Sanchez

Tightbeam 302

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Reviews are courtesy Declan Finn, Jim McCoy, Pat Patterson, Tamara Wilhite, Tom Feller, and Heath Row. Declan Finn’s web page declanfinn.com covers his books, reviews, writing, and more. Jim McCoy’s reviews and more appear at jimbossffreviews.blogspot.com. Pat Patterson’s reviews appear on his blog habakkuk21.blogspot.com and also on Good Reads and Amazon.com.

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Editorial

Your editor is anticipating cataract surgery, come December and January. There may or may not be some disruption to our publishing schedule in the short term. On the other hand, I may be obliged to stay at home and write.

We have switched mailing servers for the N3F zines. There appears to be an unresolved technical challenge, so that some people are not receiving our zines, at least not at the right address. Work on correcting this issue is under way.

We continue to welcome additional reviews for Tightbeam on all sfnal topics.

Letters

I'm sitting here reading and glancing through TB 301. I give you great credit (and all those who came before) for continuing this tradition of publishing a Tightbeam in this age of the Internet. Of course, I get an e-mail transmitted copy which I could print and and staple together just like the "old days," but that would really be silly. Still, I could.

I find it interesting that stf is still being produced and researched and read and watched in movies and on TV, etc. Reading through this TB makes me almost run out to the library and ask them to get some of the books which sound so interesting. They are so good at getting them, sometimes from inter-library loan, that it is painless. Frequently a book will come from long distance, including some Canadian University. It's a modern day wonder. Remember, I said, "Almost."

As I browse, I sometimes (and often a lot) glance up at a copy of TB that was done for me and N3F by Jack Gaughan. Tightbeam 49, May, 1968: back from the magical time for me in fandom. The covers today are "slicker" and I like stuff in color, of course, but this cover hangs in my workspace (we call it the computer room), mounted and framed and just a few feet from my right shoulder. I wish now I had saved more of what I dealt with in those days --- lots of covers, illos, and fanzines that I was led on my way to produce my own. I have only found a few pictures, but they were memorable ones, like my daughter sitting on Asimov's lap at a WorldCon. Or Gardner Dozois posing as a statue on a pedestal in front of the Convention Center in Ontario. I remember a BaltiCon at which Asimov and Roger Zelazny each kissed my wife, just so we could say she had been kissed "from A to Z."

Those were the days ... and these are the days.

Thanks for the TB, its content, and the memories.

All the best,
Keep smiling,
Gary Labowitz

Anime

Astra: Lost in Space Review by Jessi Silver

In the year 2063, travelling through space has become commonplace. Eight students from Caird High School, along with one child, set out for a school camp on a nearby planet. However, the students are then mysteriously transported 5,000 light years away from home, with no way to call for help. Aboard an abandoned spaceship they call the Astra, these nine students slowly try to make their way back and figure out why they were transported in the first place. – ANN



Review: Note – This review may contain minor plot spoilers for the series. Because this show presents major revelations in its second half, I've done my best to only speak as generally as possible.

Despite the fact that many fans my age were introduced to anime through the iconic science fiction titles that trickled their way over to the West in the early years, it feels as though it's been quite a while since the sci-fi genre has really been front-and-center. While the surge in slice-of-life anime in the early 2000's has certainly provided me with many favorite series, and the current popularity of isekai stories is starting to bear more fruit for fans of my tastes, sometimes I just get nostalgic for stories about space travel and the intrepid spirit of humanity. Astra: Lost in Space, a recently-concluded series from this Summer, does a real bang-up job of scratching that itch.

The story begins in the not-so-distant future, after space travel has become much more mainstream and accessible. A group of high school students, as well as one of the student's younger siblings, are attending a space survival camp established by their school. They arrive on the uninhabited planet McPa and are tasked with surviving for a week, after which point they'll be picked up and taken home. Not long after they're left to their own devices, however, a mysterious gateway appears and swallows them up, depositing them in space in orbit around an unfamiliar planet. It's only by chance that there happens to be an abandoned ship near enough for them to reach using the propellants on their space suits, and by some miracle the ship is operational. What they discover soon afterward, though, is that they're more than 5,000 light years from home, and that making their way back will entail landing on several unfamiliar and potentially dangerous planets in order to maintain their food and water stores.



The characters work together to save one of their own.

Much of the early part of the series revolves around the technical aspects of the group's survival – things like finding edible food, interacting safely with native plants and animals, and ensuring that they can make it safely to their next destination. As the characters interact more and start to

develop their relationships with one-another, they begin to realize that there are some interesting, potentially troubling links and commonalities between them. All the students are particularly talented in one field or another – for example, Kanata, the de-facto leader, has trained as a decathlete and exhibits almost superhuman strength and physical ability, whereas Aries (whose POV we follow in the early moments of the first episode) has a photographic memory, a ton of curiosity, and a talent for bringing people together. Their group dynamics, especially in this survival scenario, seem almost too convenient, and it's the search for answers related to their current situation that creates the bulk of the drama in the second half of the series.

I found the depth of the plot to be a pleasant surprise. I'd classify the series as an all-ages show (especially considering the fact that Funimation provided an English simul-dub alongside the subtitled simulcast), but it definitely touches on some heavy subject matter, including genetics, adoption, brainwashing, government cover-up and information tampering, sex and gender... there's a lot to unpack in this relatively short series, and that's only the stuff that's unfolding in plain view. I think perhaps the most meaningful thing I took away from the series was its discussion of "nature versus nurture," as there's a great deal of discussion regarding the fulfillment of genetic destiny and how the characters, having existed as individuals with their own likes, dislikes, and talents, are able to subvert the heavy expectations placed upon them by their parents and guardians. As our own society begins to learn more about DNA and its implications on the type of people we become, it's stories like this which allow us to (hopefully!) talk through and avoid potential ethical and moral mistakes.

While personally I find the story-craft part of an anime series to be its most important aspect, this series has some interesting visual tricks up its sleeve as well. As should be evident from the included screen shots, certain scenes make use of additional letter-boxing, creating a visual tension between scenes that fill the frame and those which feel more enclosed by the visual landscape. It actually took me until partway through the first episode to realize what was going on, so the effect isn't overly-blatant in my opinion. On the other hand, this series suffers from the same issue that many space-faring fiction does, in that none of the places or creatures feel entirely "alien." Instead, they're all variations on plants, animals, and landscapes that can be found on Earth. That said, I believe coming up with something entirely visually unique has to be nearly-impossible, as we only have a very limited frame of reference to the doubtlessly infinite variation of life that could exist in the universe, so this is a very small complaint.

There are some parts of the series that definitely require mentioning as they're presented in ways that end up being a little bit complicated. Because of the family situations of the characters, there's a lot of talk about adoption. There are several references to characters' "real parents," referring to their biological parents. I believe the preferred terminology is "biological parents" and "adoptive parents," as "real" parents implies that adoptive parents are somehow "less-than" biological parents. I hope that Funimation updates that language before releasing the series on disc as I think it could pose a problem for some viewers. It's also revealed later on that one of the characters is intersex (has physical traits/primary and secondary sex characteristics associated with both sexes). While I'm pleasantly surprised that the character's situation didn't mark them as a gag character (though once they reveal their secret, they do tease some of the other characters occasionally), I think there are some more complicated ways to unpack this that I might not be familiar with as someone who isn't intersex. The Chatty AF Podcast has some more meaty discussion about this, though be aware that they do talk about the character specifically so if you'd rather not be spoiled it might be best to wait until after watching the series.

There are, I'm a bit disappointed to say, also some fanservicey moments, although they're pretty mild in the grand scheme of things. There's a "beach episode" where there are some bodily comparisons between the girls, and there are a couple of shower scenes sprinkled into the earlier episodes. The characters' space suits (for both genders) are also a bit body-conscious in a way I found unnecessary. It's not overwhelming by any means, but I think it bears repeating that these are high school children, and despite their precocious intellects probably shouldn't be made victim to the ever-present creeping anime camera POV. If you're watching this with younger folks, this is the one major aspect that I think might be surface-level uncomfortable and require some discussion going into the series.



It takes teamwork to ensure survival for all. Screenshot from Funimation.

There are perhaps arguments to be made that the frequency and extreme nature of some of the late-game reveals might be a little bit out-there; as someone who prefers to let stories unfold rather than analyze things in the heat of the moment, I can't say that it bothered me all that much. In fact, since much of the story seemed to be in service of a greater level of social commentary

than I would have expected going into the series, I was willing to forgive material that otherwise would have seemed over-the-top. For me, the real measure of the show's quality is the amount of time dedicated to events after the story's climax. The final episode is nearly 50 minutes long and provides decent closure to the majority of the characters' stories, also implying that their actions throughout the series managed to have far-reaching positive consequences to society. In a time where we're seeing first-hand the impact that young people can have on the ideals and direction of society, I think this is a great aspect to focus on.

Some folks may argue that art shouldn't be political, but I'd counter that decades of literary and screen science fiction (and many other genres) have demonstrated otherwise. While *Astra: Lost in Space* might be considered more of a light-weight in this sense, in the grand tradition of this style of storytelling it still manages to have plenty to say from within its brightly-colored, occasionally comedic, and very modern animated box. I found the series to be not only entertaining, but also satisfying in the way its story unfolds.

Pros: The series has a good balance between its entertaining plot and its commentary on several social issues. Overall a very solid all-ages anime series.



Cons: It makes a few missteps with underage fanservice and the translation of certain adoption-related terminology. Some of the plot reveals may be too "convenient" for some viewers.

Content Warnings: Mild underage nudity. Some perilous situations. Insensitive discussion of adoption. Depictions of verbal abuse. Brief gun-related violence.

Grade: A-

Blade of the Immortal

Review by Jessi Silver



Manji is a crass, violent samurai with a special ability: he cannot die. Cursed with immortality by the nun Yobikuni as punishment for his ruthless deeds, he has grown weary of his ageless life. The only way to lift the curse is to slay 1,000 evil men. So Manji wanders Japan, shedding the blood of the wicked on his quest to finally die. – ANN

Episode Summary: Rin bore witness to the murder of her father and the rape of her mother at the hands of members of the Itto-ryu sword school, and since that time she's sought revenge for these heinous crimes. In the interim, the Itto-ryu have only gained power, and this revenge seems further and further away. An old woman points Rin toward the slayer of 100 men, a man named Manji, and tells her to hire him on as a bodyguard.



Manji lives his life alone, and resists Rin's vengeful quest. Righteousness and evil are in the eye of the beholder, and he seeks only to fight evil men. But if Rin is able to prove her conviction to him, he may consider helping her. As Rin faces off against a foe, Manji appears and is quickly dismembered, but his body houses a secret – he's cursed with immortality until the time that he kills a thousand evil men. Only then will he be allowed to die.

Manji has terrifying skills as a killer. Screenshot from Amazon.

Impressions: Art can be beautiful, and it can be horrifying. And sometimes both of those things are truly in the eye of the beholder.

I was around for the mediocre Bee Train adaptation of this story back in 2008. I think many of us believed that the art style of the original manga was something that just couldn't be captured or portrayed in animated form, and kind of left things at that. The series, ended about 1-cour and we all mostly forgot about it. It's sort of like how Berserk keeps receiving aesthetically poor adaptations – if a story as well-regarded as that one can't get a decent-looking full adaptation, then perhaps nothing can. This is one of those cases where I'm glad to be very wrong, as this is the one episode I've watched this season that I truly feel comfortable referring to as "Art." There's a deliberate use of color in many scenes, filters are used to evoke a sense of age and deterioration, and the character artwork feels like it's paying respect to the manga rather than simplifying it out of convenience. The entire package feels hand crafted, and much like Manji's quest it feels as though it's atoning for past sins.

That said, there's no dancing around it – this story and this episode are incredibly violent. It's a story about swordsmen murdering one-another, after all, and like many similar samurai tales there is plenty of blood flowing and many limbs flying. The episode certainly doesn't shy away from showing these things happening, and in many cases frames character deaths very artfully and provides plenty of time to observe them. I'm typically not really tolerant of violence, but in this case the scenes are almost like paintings, deliberately planned and richly-illustrated with plasma and hemoglobin.

One of the changes from the original material I think is notable is the symbol on Manji's clothing. In the original, it's actually a manji symbol – basically a swastika, which during the time period in which the story takes place would have been a symbol of good fortune. The symbol used in this incarnation is evocative of the manji, but different enough that we aren't all being distracted by discussions about it (especially in today's political environment).



This is certainly not a series I'd encourage anyone to watch without reservation, because the content is just so shocking and graphic that I feel like it would be kind of weird to evangelize about it to other people. But personally I'm always on the lookout for animation as art (in addition to entertainment) and I definitely want to follow this one for that reason alone.

Manji is almost always injured in some way.

Pros: Visually stunning, with a lot of very deliberate use of different styles of animation. Discusses moral quandaries that come along with the concepts of good and evil.

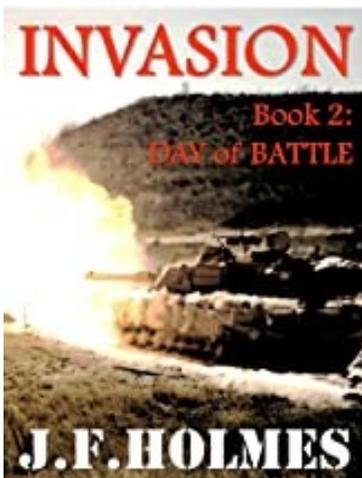
Cons: Perhaps not a con for all, but this episode (and likely the series as a whole) is extremely violent.

Content Warnings: Rape/sexual assault (referenced), murder, violence including dismemberment, suicide, mutilation.

Grade: B+

Novels

Invasion: Day of Battle, by John F Holmes Review by Pat Patterson



I just re-read my review of "Invasion, Book 1:Resistance," which you can find here; and I'm thinking: WOW, was I ever a tough grader! I gave that book 4 stars, SOLELY because it ended on such a cliff-hanger. I believe I'm going to have to amend that review, now, and clarify that it was BECAUSE IT WAS SUCH A COMPELLING STORY!!!! and had a cliff-hanger ending. The second volume wasn't available at that time, so it was really just frustration that I couldn't go further that's reflected in the loss of a star. It wasn't that I didn't like it; it's that I liked it too much.

Well, Holmes has atoned for that with this book. Not only has he written the much desired sequel, but his prologue does an excellent job of refreshing my memory without boring me to tears. I read the first book in August,

to get the review out before the Dragon Awards were voted, and somehow (it was personal stuff) I missed the release of this in November. So, the Prologue was needed, and was very well done, indeed.

This is the kind of book that would be placed on the top shelf of my bookcase, in the days before e-books were my drug of choice. If I turn my head, I can see the crowded array of those top-shelf books: Heinlein; Niven; Pournelle; Drake. Clancy and Crichton were on the next shelf, by the way, just to give you a better idea of my rating system back then. It's outmoded, now, because I have shifted over to ebooks, and I might procure as many as three dead-tree books each year, and those are usually reference materials; the exceptions are autographed copies, which I do pick up from time to time.

So much for the preliminary, now on to the review of THIS volume in the story, which may be found on Amazon here:

Many of the characters from "Resistance" continue their stories in "Day of Battle," and some of them regrettably end their stories here. That's to be expected, in a war fought against superior technology, particularly when the enemy holds the high ground.

However, the covert plan has made arrangements for those circumstances. Timing, as always, is the key, and since the enemy has systematically stomped on advanced communications, that is probably the most difficult part of the plan to implement. Everything has to happen at the same time, or, at least, in the exact sequence. And that's a difficult story to tell.

Holmes manages to do that quite effectively, however, by telling the complete story of each point-of-view character from beginning to end. When he shifts the POV, he summarizes the other activities that are taking place at the same time, so that we realize the incredible complexity of the battle, without getting lost in the story.

The space battle has to be won. The submarine attacks have to be protected. The cities have to be invaded. The strong points and other key installations have to be defeated, and it all has to happen at the same time, or it won't work, and we won't get another chance.

It would not be possible, without the assistance of the superbrains of the artificial intelligences, coordinated by the commanding general with a brain link. It would not be possible, without the theft of an invader spacecraft, piloted by the Empress of Japan. It would not be possible, without the skill and determination of a pitifully small number of combat veterans, who have been waiting for their chance. It would not be possible, without the volunteers and conscripts from the generation which has grown up post-invasion.

And Holmes manages to tell every story, in a way that allows us to experience the personal sacrifices made at each level.

The book doesn't solve every issue, fortunately, so we have (at least) one other volume to anticipate. The same cliff-hanger feel isn't here in this story, for which we may be truly grateful.

Peace be on your household.

Ethnic and Racial Diversity in Harry Potter Analysis by Chris Nuttall

I make no pretence that any of this is original. It grew out of a conversation I was having with a friend about authorial politics vs. the unavoidable implications of their settings.

One of the fundamental problems with any rational analysis of Harry Potter is that much of the series isn't rational. Large parts of the Wizarding World don't seem to make much sense, even when viewed as a quasi-medieval society rather than a variant on modern Britain. The simple fact that magic has remained a secret from the vast majority of Muggle society – even 'now' – implies that wizards are both extremely proactive in hiding themselves and extremely rare. These points are both supported by the books.

Let us consider, for a start, the problem of getting nations that have interests in common to cooperate. It isn't easy, not in the real world. And yet we are told that wizards remain hidden on a global scale – and not just wizards, but dragons, goblins, giants, centaurs and many other out-right non-human beings. This requires a degree of international (magical) cooperation that may be the greatest piece of fiction in the series! Indeed, while witches might have been hunted across Europe (with reason, in the series), other societies respected their magic-users and their wizards couldn't be expected to abandon their traditions and go into hiding without some fairly strong incentive.

This leads to three separate possibilities:

First, there were no non-European wizards, save for the occasional muggleborn. European Wizards followed European Muggles as they swept the globe, setting up satellite communities near Muggle colonies. The handful of muggleborns they discovered were abducted and assimilated. Over the years, these cultures indulged in a little cultural appropriation to give themselves a separate character to their homelands.

Second, European Wizards made a major magical breakthrough (the wand?) that allowed them to invade non-European magical settlements and force them to go into hiding. Groups that agreed to surrender were offered a seat at the table, groups that insisted on fighting were brutally crushed. The British campaigns against the Thugs in India, for example, might have been targeted on rogue magic-users as well as barbaric ... well, thugs. Over the years, the newcomers integrated with the original population, a process made easier by the Wizarding World's general lack of racism (at least racism directed against human wizards.)

Third, there were non-European communities that accepted the European belief that wizards needed to go into hiding and worked to make it happen.

Call me a cynic, but I would bet on either one or two.

Now, coming to the issue of Wizarding Britain.

It is a terrible mistake to assume that the racial and ethnic characteristics of the general population are automatically mirrored in a smaller subset. The Amish, for example, are generally white; British Muslims are (roughly) seventy percent East Asian (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis). By this standard, the Wizarding World would count as a small – very small – subset of

the population.

In Harry's year in Gryffindor, there are ten pupils: five boys and five girls. Assuming this number is matched by the other three houses, there are forty pupils in Harry's overall year and a total student population (40×7) of 280 at Hogwarts. If we therefore assume that wizards, on average, live around 100 years, we have a rough total of 4000 wizards in Wizarding Britain. The Wizarding World includes a number of others – homeschooled wizards, werewolves, squibs, etc – so we may as well assume that the total overall population is around 5000 in all.

On one hand, there was a major war going on when Harry was born and, proportionally, the losses inflicted on the magical population were probably quite high. But, on the other hand, it's quite likely that the population of the Wizarding World remained fairly stable for centuries prior to the war. The combination of magical birth control and female emancipation probably played a major role in ensuring that the average birthrate was (barely) enough to keep the population from falling sharply.

Indeed, most of the pureblood families we see in the books have only one or two children (the Weasley family is perhaps the only major exception). Draco and James Potter, for example, were both only children, while Sirius Black had a single brother. I can't recall any mention of a family larger than three children, save for the Weasleys.

This – and a few other factors – have interesting effects on the Wizarding World.

First, nearly every witch and wizard in Britain goes to Hogwarts. Wizarding Britain is thus more of a large town than a giant community. Everyone will speak the same language. The in-jokes will not change. Culture will be near-universal, with no room for smaller subgroups. There will be very few true strangers in Wizarding Britain. Even if you don't know someone personally, you'll know someone who knows them. Indeed, all the students at Hogwarts will probably know everyone in their age group and (probably) two or three years in each direction.

This may not be an advantage. People like Hermione – who has a remarkable talent for putting peoples noses out of joint – may find their reputation follows them after they graduate from school. Something like this may have bedevilled Professor Snape.

Second, most witches and wizards will probably marry other witches and wizards. Non-wizard marriage (i.e. to Muggles) is socially discouraged, even if it isn't formally banned outright. (Even the Weasleys, the most tolerant pureblood wizards in canon, don't marry outside the magical community.) Such marriages may not even last, once the secret is revealed. Indeed, the demand for secrecy may well ruin such matches before they can even begin.

What this means is that Wizarding Britain is a relatively small community with a relatively small influx of new blood.

We know from canon that Wizarding Britain is actually subdivided into purebloods, halfbloods and muggleborns. Purebloods must have four magical grandparents – ideally, they should also be able to claim a pure lineage going back as far as possible. This actually provides a strong incentive to marry within the community, rather than embracing new (or non-magical) blood. Harry and Ginny's children will count as purebloods, but Ron and Hermione's children will not.

(Note that Ron is the only known member of his family to marry a muggleborn.)

(The disadvantage of this, of course, is that inbreeding will become a serious problem sooner or later.)

Simple logic tells us, therefore, that there will be relatively little racial diversity amongst the older purebloods. There is no suggestion that the vast majority of purebloods, particularly those of older families, are anything other than white. Nor will there be much ethnic diversity, in the common sense. Everyone who enters Wizarding Britain will have gone through Hogwarts and picked up much of the local culture.

There's an additional point here that may have shaped Wizarding Britain. Wizards have a huge superiority complex – and, for much of the last thousand years, they would have been right. I suspect that Wizarding Britain's standard of living was vastly superior to Muggle Britain until comparatively recently. Muggleborns may have had no inclination to rock the boat because they had it much better, amongst the wizards, than they did at home.

How, then, to account for the known non-white characters?

It's possible that the Indian twins and Cho Chang (the name isn't actually Chinese) are the daughters of purebloods from India and China respectively. They would probably be counted as purebloods, even if their parents and grandparents weren't native to Wizarding Britain – I would guess they're actually second-generation immigrants, given that they don't seem to be that culturally different to the rest of the students. Dean Thomas is a halfblood – presumably, his mother was black. Kingsley Shacklebolt is the only one who doesn't seem to fit in – although, again, he may be the descendent of immigrants.

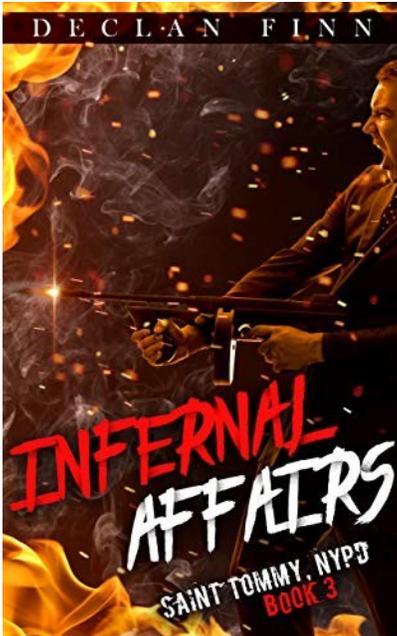
The people who accuse Rowling of portraying an all-white world, without much ethnic and racial diversity, are wrong. The (largely) white population and complete cultural hegemony of Wizarding Britain is an artefact of its social system.

Infernal Affairs By Declan Finn Review by Jim McCoy

Saint Tommy is at it again and I'm never moving to New York. Seriously, if this is the type of thing that goes down there I'm staying in Detroit because it's safer here. Our only problems are a few hundred gang bangers and some corrupt politicians. Never in my life have we been invaded by a hell spawned demon, a crazed death cult or an insane warlock, as in Declan Finn's newest work, *Infernal Affairs*. What a bunch of whackadoo insanity.

I say that with love though because, once again, Finn has given us a winner. This is one of those times where I really wish I had more hours in a day because I couldn't get enough of this book... And I couldn't get enough sleep either. I drive for a living, so I had to put the thing down, but UGGGHHHH. That doesn't mean I wanted to. I just had to do what was necessary to stay alive?

Oh, did I say "what was necessary to stay alive?"



I think I did!

And, coincidentally, what you'll see a lot of in this book, sort of. While Tommy does literally fight the good fight, and does it well, he's not always looking out for his own wellbeing. He lives up to the title of his series. Tommy places himself directly in harm's way in service to his Lord and he does it willingly and unflinchingly. It's good to see. Finn gets that it's necessary to stand up to evil and that sometimes it takes more than words. It's a refreshing change of pace from what I commonly see now-a-days.

Oh, and speaking of doing what is necessary to stay alive...

There is one particular sequence in the book. It's one of those awesome things where it simultaneously feels like it was over way too soon and like you've been stuck in the action all day trying to figure out what happens next. Like, you want to know what happens but you don't want it to end. I don't know if that makes sense but it's true.

This same sequence also reads like a nightmare. I almost want to ask Finn if he had a dream like this and threw it into his novel. Seriously. I'm half tempted to think that the whole thing was a result of too much cheese before bed and I find myself wondering: Should I try to talk him out of eating cheese before bed for his own good? Or maybe show up with a block of cheddar and a box of crackers just before bedtime for my benefit? Then again, he gets paid for this. Do you guys know if he maybe prefers the mixed color cheese like a Colby-Jack? Hmmm....

Ok, now the disclaimer. I am a Protestant Christian who is divorced and has two daughters being raised as Catholics by their mother. (Yes, I see them and pay for them, but it's a long story.) I was actually undergoing the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults right before I separated from my wife. (For those of you who missed it, that's how you become a confirmed Catholic if you didn't go to Catechism as a kid.) So, I have no problem whatsoever with the religion as contained in the novel. The thought of a living, breathing, praying saint (or prophet, more properly since no one is officially a saint until after they die) is one I find fascinating and entertaining. On the other hand, if you are an anti-Christian (in general) or anti-Catholic (in particular) type person maybe you'd be better off with something else. I mean, Christian and/or non-bigoted types would love *Infernal Affairs* but some people just suck.

Oh, and the other disclaimer: *Infernal Affairs* is the third in the series, coming after *Hell Spawn* and *Death Cult*. You could legitimately read *Infernal Affairs* as a standalone and enjoy it, but why would you? The first two books are awesome as well and, if you didn't read them already, you get the chance that I never had: To binge-read the entire first trilogy straight through. Although, I mean, I do own all three books and there's no law that says I can't RE-read them.

I love villains that I hate. If you've read this blog you know precisely what I mean. Finn's villain this time around is a complete POS. It's good to root for the saint, but it's fun to root against Satan and all of his works as well. Believe me, this is one for the ages. I don't want to give too much away because a lot of the nature of the villain is revealed slowly throughout the book but I'd go to war against this guy. I mean, I'm not a saint and I'd probably get creamed but at least I'd get creamed knowing I was on the right side.

I have to admit to being a bit relieved here, too. I was part of the Kickstarter for Hell Spawn. I'm glad I bought the book, because I got an autographed copy but part of it was that if it raised enough money, Finn would add books to the end of the series. For those that missed it, I'm a fan of Finn's but I was a bit concerned that he'd stretch the story he had too far to try to fill the extra books he now has to write. I'm both happy and relieved to find out that I was wrong. This book contains what it needs to contain and there is no sign that it was stretched unnecessarily. Maybe I should have known better.

HOWEVER

If I'm remembering correctly (and that's a risk I'm prepared to take) we should have at least two more of these coming. I, personally, am looking forward to them and I suppose my bank account will just have to shut up and deal. I mean, honestly, what geek pays attention to what his accountant has to say anyway? I've never met one.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Flaming Drones

Infernal Affairs
Declan Finn
Silver Empire, 2019

Short Stories

Musings on The Cold Equations
by Chris Nuttall

It seemed, almost, that she still sat small and bewildered and frightened on the metal box beside him, her words echoing hauntingly clear in the void she had left behind her:

I didn't do anything to die for—I didn't do anything—

-Tom Godwin, The Cold Equations

Say what you like about him – and a great deal has been said, as is the wont of our woke-world, over the past few months – John Campbell was one hell of an editor. He understood, at a primal level, what made a story actually work; he understood how to subvert expectations to make *The Cold Equations* a story that is still talked about nearly seventy years after it was written. Indeed, it is the ending – so unexpected, by the standards of the time – that caused most of the comment. At base, we don't want an innocent girl to die. And yet, die she must.

The basic plot is relatively simple. On a colony world in an otherwise empty star system, in a universe where spaceflight and FTL travel is possible but expensive and difficult, a disease is spreading. A vaccine must be delivered immediately or six men will die. In order to do this, an interstellar transport ship must drop out of FTL and launch an emergency dispatch ship (the EDS) to the colony world. Because fuel is expensive, there is only a limited supply on the

EDS; the pilot, Barton, is going to have to remain on the colony world until he can be recovered later. Because of the cold equations of interplanetary spaceflight, the ship cannot take on more mass (such as a stowaway) or it will miss the planet, condemning the pilot and the colonists to death. As stowaways will always try to space the pilot first, the pilot has a blaster and orders to shoot to kill before he is killed himself. And Barton discovers, when he is committed to his flight, that he has a stowaway.

But this is no desperate man, condemned to kill or be killed. The stowaway is Marilyn Lee Cross, an eighteen-year-old girl. She doesn't want to steal the fuel, she just wants to see her brother ... a colonist. She's an innocent abroad. She doesn't realize – unlike everyone else in the story – that she has not only walked into danger, she has walked into certain death. If she stays on the ship, it will crash and eight people will die. Her presence guarantees it. Barton tries, desperately, to work the figures so everyone might live, but he draws a blank. There's no way to cheat the cold equations. She says goodbye to her brother, then walks into the airlock. Her death saves seven other lives.

Godwin works hard to tug on our heartstrings throughout the story, building up an expectation that – at the end – Marilyn will be saved. She's an innocent girl; she's no spoiled brat, she declares herself ready to face the consequences ... unaware, all too unaware, that those consequences include certain death. (By the standards of the story's era, when men were expected to protect women, she's the last person anyone would want to die.) She talks of her hopes and dreams, slowly realising that they'll never come to pass. And in the end, she redeems herself the only way she can ... by walking to her death. Her suicide saves Barton from having to kill her in order that seven other men might live.

It is no surprise that the story is controversial, both when it was published and now. By the standards of the time, Barton would have found a solution – probably with undiscovered super-science – and the story would have been forgotten. By now, with more advanced technology and different social attitudes, the story has been branded sexist and misogynist, with Godwin (or Campbell) choosing to overlook possible solutions so the girl must die. (One commenter, according to the foreword to the Baen edition, included a suggestion of pederasty.) And yet, without the grim ending, the story would not be so well known. I would kill to write a story that remained in the public mind for sixty years. Campbell knew his job and he did it very well.

Half of the story, naturally, rests on the technical limits, as they were known in those days. The EDS apparently cannot be flown on automatic (although that would have made matters worse, as there would be no one on the ship to explain to Marilyn that she had to die; worse, perhaps, she might suffocate on an airless ship, her body still adding its weight to the load and ensuring certain doom.) There would also be obvious limits to how much fuel the mothership could carry (regardless of the cost factor) and how much they could risk giving to the EDS without cutting their own safety margin to the bone. Indeed, many of the little quibbles with the story can be resolved by bearing in mind that the EDS was not designed to carry the vaccine; it was pressed into service on an emergency basis.

The other half rests on social attitudes and awareness. Everyone in the story, except Marilyn, understands the dangers of stowing away on a spacecraft. They know this because they live in space, they work in space; they understand, at a very primal level, the dangers of space. A sign marked 'UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL KEEP OUT!' is more than enough for them, on the grounds that no one would erect such a sign without good reason. Marilyn, on the other hand,

was born on Earth and was a mere passenger on the mothership, unaware of the dangers except at an intellectual level. On Earth, perhaps within the Sol System, she could be rescued. Outside Earth, the technology and resources to save her simply don't exist. Indeed, this may also explain why Barton didn't bother to search the ship for stowaways before casting off, reasoning – correctly, from his point of view – that no one would be stupid enough to hijack the EDS when there was literally nowhere to go. The empty colony system has no place that can and will take the fuel and hide the pilot with no questions asked. (The downside of asking 'who would be stupid enough to do [whatever]?' is that there are people too ignorant – like Marilyn – to realise that they're doing something incredibly stupid.)

There are no easy ways out of the problem, as far as I can see. And indeed, most of the proposed solutions are simply impractical. For example:

Point: Marilyn could land the ship herself, perhaps following directions from the planet or the mothership (or simple remote control). Indeed, a fertile young girl might be more important to the colony than the older pilot. Barton can commit suicide to save her life.

Counterpoint: There's no suggestion that Marilyn can fly the ship (if she had pilot training, she would have understood the dangers), nor is there any suggestion that the ship can be guided from the ground/mothership. The mothership would presumably have other pilots, but the speed-of-light delay would make it impossible to guide the ship safely; there might not be a pilot on the ground. (This also raises the issue of why Barton should die to save Marilyn from the consequences of her own mistake, but it's fairly clear that Barton would have done so if that was an option.)

Point: There are plenty of items on the EDS that could be jettisoned instead, balancing the cold equations.

Counterpoint: The items may be vitally important (an acceleration couch, for example), too small to make a difference (pen and paper) or simply impossible to dismantle and remove in time.

Point: Marilyn and Barton could amputate themselves, throwing out their limbs to balance the cold equations. Marilyn could survive without her arms and legs ...

Counterpoint(s): First, there is no suggestion that either of them have the medical training and equipment to perform several amputations successfully. (My wife, a doctor, said she'd be very hesitant to try, even if things really were desperate. Second, what sort of life would Marilyn (and Barton) have on the colony world, if they were literally limbless? Death might be preferable.

As far as I can tell, given the setting, the outcome is inevitable. There simply isn't any solution that will allow everyone to live. It is for that reason, I suspect, that most negative commenters choose to nitpick the setting itself, pointing out that the whole universe seems designed by criminally-negligent robber barons. There may be some truth in this, although – again – we tend to run up against hard limits. If fuel is so expensive, for example, it is unlikely there will be much of a surplus. (It's also possible that the real reason for the blaster is not for the pilot to shoot stowaways, but for him to shoot himself if something goes seriously wrong and he's condemned to die in interstellar space.) There's also the blinkered mindset, as I noted above, that

comes from thinking inside the box – you might know the dangers, but there’s no guarantee that someone from outside will also know. It’s quite easy to fall into the trap of assuming that everyone shares your understanding, a trap that can be extremely dangerous.

It’s also true that a bunch of places I’ve worked had stupid rules because there was an answer to ‘who would be stupid enough to do [whatever]?’ Most of them were quite idiotically stupid; indeed, trying to carry them out bred contempt for the bureaucrats who wrote them, rather than alertness. Indeed, in this case, Barton might have skimmed on checking the EDS because he assumed that no one would try to steal something he couldn’t actually do anything with. (Ironically, a rule that the EDS had to be checked and then locked would be very far from ‘stupid’ in hindsight.) But those rules did not exist until someone broke the laws of common sense and forced the bosses to write the rules.

These days, all too many people ask – when confronted with a catastrophe – who can be blamed? Who can be sued? And *The Cold Equations* continues to resonate because of it, with one faction using the story as an example of someone who did something stupid and therefore condemned herself to death and the other pointing out that Barton and his superiors were negligent and therefore could rightfully be punished (i.e. sued) for Marilyn’s death. I find myself caught between the two viewpoints – both sides have a point – and there is no good answer. Barton should have checked the ship, it really should have been locked ... but Marilyn was also in an environment she didn’t understand, while being more than old enough to ask why rules and regulations exist. There are limits to just how many precautions we can take to deflect stupidity and/or ignorance. At some point, we must ask why the zoo – for example – is to be blamed for the idiot who climbed two fences to get into the tiger pit and promptly got eaten. At some point, we must acknowledge that the zoo took all reasonable precautions and cannot be blamed for the person who didn’t stop to ask why the fence was there before they started to climb it.

The blunt truth is two-fold. First, warning signs generally exist for a reason. Sometimes, they explain the danger (WARNING: FLOOD). Sometimes, they don’t. It is simple common sense to be wary when someone posts a sign, particularly if it’s on a door you have no business entering. If you don’t know what the danger is, you should find out before you put your life at risk. (Or, as Niven and Pournelle put it in *Oath of Fealty*, which touches on similar themes, you run the risk of everyone else commenting ‘think of it as evolution in action.’)

Second, there are limits to just how many precautions one can take against someone who is determined to ignore them. In *The Cold Equations*, Marilyn knew she was doing something wrong. She assumed the worst she’d be facing was a jail term and willingly chose to ignore a warning sign, accepting that she might go to jail. But her ignorance sent her to her death instead. In *Oath of Fealty*, a politically-connected teenage boy gets killed in a power plant ... after he and his friends ignore a set of warning signs and break through, IIRC, a locked door. It may be heartless to say that he brought it on himself – and he’s a lot less sympathetic than Marilyn – but it’s fundamentally true. Sure, some warning signs are only there because some barmy bureaucrat thought they were a good idea. You shouldn’t assume that’s true unless you know how things actually work.

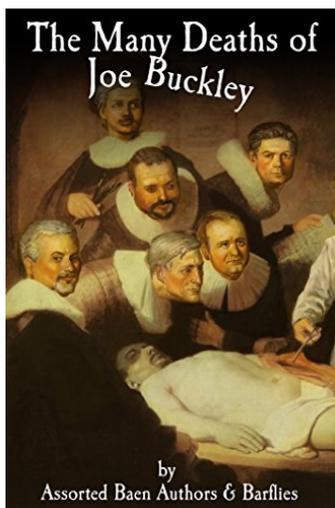
It’s easy to say, from the comfort of one’s armchair, that the people involved should have done something different. It’s easy to proclaim that it should be possible to win a war without taking a single life, for example, but much harder to do it in real life. The people at the sharp end

know it's simply not possible. Accidents happen. Sometimes, you do everything right – and/or everything you're legally required to do – and accidents happen anyway. And when they do, all you can reasonably do is pick up the pieces, learn from experience and turn the whole affair into a cautionary tale. Sometimes, there's no good choice. You have to take the least bad option and cope with it as best as possible.

We have a habit of forgetting that, these days. We like to think that perfection is possible – and, when we don't get it, we waste time trying to find someone to blame. Our society is practically structured to allow us to put off the hard decisions for quite some time, until they catch up with us and drag us under. Marilyn made a string of mistakes – as did everyone else – that ended in tragedy. You cannot cheat the cold equations. Godwin and Campbell did us a vast favour by reminding us of that, well before the rot really started to set in.

And frankly, their story is one that should be read by everyone.

The Many Deaths of Joe Buckley by Assorted Baen Authors & Barflies Review by Pat Patterson



It was quite a few years ago that I began to notice that something STRANGE was happening in the Baen Universe. I kept coming across a familiar name, across more than one series. And then, in Ringo's stories of alien centaurs invading, there was a particularly irritating Persona Data Assistant, given the same name as the character: buckley.

Wasn't sure if it was real, at first, but when I researched through the books, I found out: yes, it WAS true. Baen authors were killing a character named Joe Buckley, over and over and over again. I'm not going to tell you WHY, because that would be a spoiler; I will say that it became enough of a giggle to me, that in early 2013, I asked a question in the Baen discussion forum:

"Do you have to get permission to kill Joe Buckley, or can anyone do it?"

Many, many comments down-thread someone posted a suggestion, and to the best of my knowledge, it was the first time it was ever seriously proposed that ALL the Buckley Deaths be gathered together in a single anthology. And that's what we have here. It contains a lethal alphabet, mayhem arranged to the structure of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," more forms of murder than most people could imagine. But then, most people don't write science fiction.

In addition to the death scenes, you will find valuable commentary by many of the authors, and that includes (GASP) a commentary by the dead man himself, Joe Buckley!

Now, since this was published on Veterans' Day, 2014, Buckley has been killed quite a few more times. Whether we will ever get "The Many MORE Deaths of Joe Buckley," I do not know. But, buy this book, for two reasons:

1. It is great fun!

2. ALL of the proceeds from the sale of this collection will go to two charities: Operation Baen Bulk, which sends books, ereaders, and other supplies to our men and women in uniform, and ReadAssist, which allows disabled readers free access to Baen ebooks.

How often can you enjoy mayhem that also brings good escapist literature to the troops and to the disabled? GO FOR IT!

Video

Doctor Who: The End of Time... Again by Heath Row

In early August, I attended a screening of “The End of Time,” two Doctor Who episodes, at a local Cinemark movie theater. The 2009 Christmas Special and 2010 New Year Special—and David Tennant’s final episodes as the Tenth Doctor—were shown theatrically by BBC Studios and Fathom Events to commemorate the episodes’ 10th anniversary. Yes, Tennant was the Tenth Doctor a whole 10 years ago. That’s some serious wibbly wobbly, timey wimey stuff!

Clearly, this was not the first time Doctor Who has been on the big screen. In addition to the 1965 feature film *Dr. Who and the Daleks* and the 1966 *Daleks' Invasion Earth 2150 A.D.*, both starring Peter Cushing as the Doctor, Fathom has been screening episodes roughly twice a year since 2013. In November 2016, for example, Fathom screened “The Power of the Daleks,” the animated missing third serial of the fourth season of Doctor Who. In April 2017, Fathom projected the season 10 premiere featuring Peter Capaldi as the Twelfth Doctor along with the first episode of the spin-off series *Class*. In October 2018, Fathom gave similar treatment to the premiere episode of Jodie Whittaker’s first season as the Thirteenth Doctor. And this March, Fathom showed “Logopolis,” the seventh and final serial of Doctor Who’s 18th season, as well as Tom Baker’s final regular appearance as the Fourth Doctor. That screening was held in conjunction with the Blu-Ray release of Tom Baker’s complete seventh season on the program.

But even though I’d been wearing my Doctor Who T-shirt all day—and had been looking forward to this event since I bought the ticket several weeks earlier—I almost didn’t make it to the screening... and the screening almost didn’t occur. It was almost as though the Master himself—or the Could've-Been King and his Army of Meanwhiles and Neverweres—were trying to throw a sonic screwdriver in the works.

First of all, I went to the wrong theater. (Doctor Where?) There are two Cinemarks near where I work, and I usually go to the one that’s within walking distance. Instead of checking my ticket, I walked to that theater only to learn that the screening was at the other Cinemark. If I’d walked back to work to then drive to the other theater, I’d have missed the start of the show, so I called a Lyft instead of walking back to my car.

We made it on time, but at the theater, the automated ticket dispensing kiosks were refusing to scan barcodes or print tickets. “Don’t you have any humans?” one customer asked. So I and several other people had to get in line outside in order to get our tickets printed. Then, once inside the theater, I learned that the screening hadn’t even started yet. Theater staff entered the theater twice to inform the dozen or so Doctor Who fans in attendance that the screening would

be delayed because of “technical difficulties.” So I stepped out to get popcorn and a Dr. Pepper (in honor of the Doctor, natch), only to find that one register was down and the soda dispensers had insensitive touch screens—so I had to settle for a Coke. They didn’t have any jelly babies.

Finally, about 30 minutes late, the show started—only well into the episode, when the Doctor meets the Silver Cloak, Wilfred Mott’s group of pensioner friends. Then it cut out. Theater staff asked attendees if we wanted them to start the screening over from the beginning. We practically shouted “Yes!” in unison.

I highly recommend watching Doctor Who in a movie theater. If you’ve seen the episode before, you’ll enjoy it again. And if you haven’t already seen it, even better. These episodes had several scenes that were particularly well suited to a larger screen: the Ood city and walkways, the multiplicity of Masters after he uses the Immortality Gate to imprint his genetic template on every human being on Earth, the orbiting Vinvocci spaceship, the Gallifrey Panopticon, and the materialization of Gallifrey adjacent to Earth.

In fact, I encourage Fathom to consider screening Doctor Who more frequently than twice a year. (And I don’t mean RiffTrax!) I’d go to the movie theater regularly to see one or two episodes of Doctor Who, old and new, regardless of whether it was tied to a season premiere, the debut of a new Doctor, or a Blu-Ray or DVD release. I can’t say that about many TV shows.

Following the screening, there was also a screening of a short talking-head interview with Tennant, “In Conversation with David Tennant.” Sporting a very well-trimmed beard and a Polo shirt featuring Jodie Whitaker-style rainbow piping on the collar, Tennant seemed very comfortable on camera and spoke well in his actual Scottish accent, which he dropped for the role. During the interview, Tennant reminisced about his casting as the Doctor and his time on the show, the impact Doctor Who has had on his career, and the place the program holds in larger fan and popular culture.

He was particularly affected by acting in a show that he’d watched as a child. The importance of the role really hit home during his first read through of three episodes with Elisabeth Sladen, who played companion Sarah Jane Smith for three and a half seasons opposite the Third Doctor, Jon Pertwee, and the Fourth Doctor, Tom Baker. She returned to the role in additional appearances, including after the 2005 revival and her own spin-off show, *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. Tennant described the sense of connection—over time, between Doctors, among the cast—as vertiginous. “It made your head spin,” he said.

For example, not only did Tennant act alongside Sladen, but his wife and father also appeared on the show. His wife Georgia Tennant appeared as Jenny in the sixth episode of series four, “The Doctor’s Daughter,” as well as in several specials. Tennant’s father, Sandy McDonald, was cast in an uncredited role as a footman in the seventh episode of that series, “The Unicorn and the Wasp.”

Tennant suggested that that sense of connection resonates regardless of when you started watching Doctor Who or who your favorite Doctor is. “People might have a favorite Doctor, a favorite companion, or even a favorite scene,” he said. During his time as the Doctor, Tennant remembers particularly fondly the scene on Bad Wolf Bay in which the Doctor says goodbye to Rose.