

The Black Archive #23

**THE CURSE
OF FENRIC
Sampler**



By Una McCormack

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CHAPTER 1: DOCTOR WHO vs TINA

Fucking Thatcher

During the 1980s, the British public was often reminded by the Conservative government (and its own Helen A) that ‘There Is No Alternative’ (or ‘TINA’). By this was meant that the market economy, free trade, and globalised capitalism were by far the best means of securing and distributing wealth and freedom, and that other models, in particular state socialism, had failed to deliver wealth, health, liberty, and the flourishing of the human spirit to their subjects. For British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the idea went beyond the pragmatic notion that market forces were the most efficient way to organise; it arose from her basic moral imperative that human beings should be free to exercise choice. This principle lies behind the political project that we generally call ‘Thatcherism’: free trade, freedom of the market, entrepreneurialism, privatisation, etc. I’ll leave critiques aside; you’re either for or against. It’s enough for my purposes here to note that the mainstream political rhetoric of the 1980s insisted that there was no alternative to market – an ideological stance predicated, paradoxically, upon giving people choice¹.

Certainly the rhetoric of the market was gaining ground at the BBC

¹ ‘You can have any colour you like,’ Henry Ford is supposed to have said, ‘as long as it’s black.’ Notice also that beyond the moral and political projects here there lies a conception of history as having reached an end-state, a ‘best state’, that is closely related to Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ thesis.

during this time. The organisation was undergoing the changes that would eventually result in Birtism and in the internal market. The Peacock Committee was set up in 1985 to review the Corporation's funding; although the 1986 report did call for the outsourcing of a significant proportion of the BBC's output, it did not suggest the ending of the licence fee as the government had expected. After this, something of a coup d'état occurred at the BBC: pro-Thatcherite Marmaduke Hussey was appointed Chairman of the Board of the Governors in 1986; this led within three months to the forced resignation in 1987 of Director-General Alasdair Milne, who had repeatedly been in high-profile conflict with the Conservative government². Milne's replacement, Michael Checkland, had a background in accountancy; his deputy, John Birt, would become his successor as Director-General in 1992. Under Birt's aegis the organisational reforms at the BBC would bring about a full-blown internal market, known, perhaps inevitably, as 'Producer Choice'³.

Within this shifting and challenging context, **Doctor Who** had of course been having its own difficulties. The programme's high-profile hiatus in 1985 is well documented, as are the subsequent

² Leapman, Michael, 'Alasdair Milne: BBC Executive Who Rose to Director-General But Was Sacked under Pressure from Mrs Thatcher', *The Independent*, 10 January 2013.

³ Producer Choice is an excellent study of the unintended consequences of bureaucratic reform. Intended to make the costs of programming transparent by making BBC departments charge each other for goods and services, it led to notorious absurdities such as researchers going out to buy CDs rather than using one of the best sound archives in the world. Not unintentionally, perhaps, it also led to the loss of 5,000 jobs. See Plunkett, John, 'BBC Puts an End to Producer Choice', *The Guardian*, 22 March 2006

very public and vicious falling out between producer John Nathan-Turner and script editor Eric Saward, and the summary sacking of Colin Baker⁴. By season 26, the programme had returned to a more even keel thanks to the combination of the highly experienced Nathan-Turner with a new, young script editor, Andrew Cartmel. This was Cartmel's first job in television; despite his lack of experience, he nonetheless had a clear idea of what he wanted to achieve. In particular, he was keen to bring back science fiction to a programme that had, to his mind, become bogged-down in tired thrillers, and, of course, he was set on restoring mystery to the figure of the Doctor.

Cartmel set about commissioning new writers with fresh ideas⁵. His diaries at the time give the impression almost of an open-door policy, like a prototype writers' room: during the production of *Dragonfire* (1987) he recalls having Ben Aaronovitch, Ian Briggs, and Stephen Wyatt in the room all at once: '[F]or the next quarter of an hour we had three of the best young writers in Britain trying to come up with a name for a futuristic fruit drink'⁶. Cartmel's policy continued throughout season 26. Ian Briggs recalls:

'Andrew facilitated a lot of interaction between us. We'd sometimes overlap script meetings if someone arrived early or overran, and chat about each other's story and scripts, sometimes offering ideas or feedback. Andrew also fed us

⁴ Extensively documented in Marson, Richard, *JN-T: The Life and Scandalous Times of John Nathan-Turner*.

⁵ Only Pip and Jane Baker had previously written for **Doctor Who**, and their story was a holdover from the previous season.

⁶ Cartmel, Andrew, *Script Doctor: The Inside Story of Doctor Who 1986-89*, pp77-78.

updates on each other's scripts and gave us finished drafts. And he gave me finished drafts during my season off and introduced me to the new writers. Occasionally we dropped in on one another's shoots. So we knew what was happening in each other's stories and could draw on them or support them, as in Ace's reference in *Fenric* to the old house in *Ghost Light* [1989].⁷

To watch **Doctor Who** during this period is to see a narrative and production renaissance: there's great playfulness and quirkiness, particularly in earlier stories such as *Paradise Towers*, *Delta and the Bannermen* (both 1987), and *The Happiness Patrol* (1988). Increasingly there is a seriousness of intent. By the final season (by which time Cartmel had realised that period rather than futuristic settings played to the strengths of the designers), there is real ambition in the complexity of the stories being made. *The Curse of Fenric* and *Ghost Light* are the highpoint of this. Some of these experiments don't work; some point forwards to new forms of televisual storytelling.

The two opening episodes of *The Curse of Fenric*, for example, seem to hover between the straightforward storytelling of earlier, more theatrical television drama, and a speedier intercutting of scenes more reminiscent of film. This does sometimes affect the coherence of the story; the viewer has to adjust between the two modes, and try to understand whether scenes are happening immediately after each other, or with some time lapse between them. But the production is deeply ambitious, particularly given the schedule: the whole story is shot in 14 days between 3 April and 20

⁷ Personal communication with the author, April 2018.

April 1989, a remarkable achievement for what is, in effect, a short film⁸. Notably, *The Curse of Fenric* is a period drama made entirely on location, five years before **Middlemarch** (1994), which is generally held to have revolutionised and refreshed BBC period drama. Of course, there are fewer vampires in George Eliot.

The tragedy is that the programme was at the time deeply unloved by the institution, considered tired, dated, and something of an embarrassment. Peter Cregeen, Head of Series at BBC Drama at the time, and rather gamely interviewed for the *Survival* DVD extra 'Endgame' (where he calls himself 'the man who cancelled **Doctor Who**'), states that the general feeling was that the show needed a rest. The story of **Doctor Who** between 1987 and 1989 is one of a slow smothering, with nobody willing to take the flak for cancelling the programme outright, while various parties conspired to ensure the impossibility of its continued existence. Scheduled against **Coronation Street** (1960-) and led by a producer who was desperate to leave⁹, the odds were stacked against **Doctor Who** surviving into the 1990s. There was uncertainty during the transmission of *The Curse of Fenric* (and *Survival* (1989)¹⁰): on 23 October 1989 (two days before the first episode was transmitted) DJ Steve Wright stated on his BBC Radio 1 show that there would be no new series of the programme in 1990; on 1 November, the day of the broadcast of episode 2, Anne Robinson on **Points of**

⁸ *Doctor Who: The Complete History* Volume 46, p75.

⁹ See Marson, *JN-T*, particularly chapter 12, 'Persuaded to Stay'.

¹⁰ Cartmel's addition of the Doctor's last speech to the end of *Survival* makes it clear that the production team knew there wasn't going to be a show in the near future.

View denied the programme had been axed¹¹. In early February 1990 it was revealed that contract options for Sylvester McCoy and Sophie Aldred had not been taken up. John Nathan-Turner left the BBC in August 1990¹². By the end of 1990, an announcement had been made that the show would not be produced in-house.

¹¹ *The Complete History* #46, p78-9.

¹² *The Complete History* #46, p122-3.

BIOGRAPHY

Una McCormack is a *New York Times* bestselling science fiction writer. She has written a handful of **Doctor Who** novels, as well as **Doctor Who** audio dramas, short stories, journalism, and essays. She also writes novels based on **Star Trek: Deep Space 9** and **Star Trek: Discovery**. She has a doctorate in sociology and teaches creative writing at a university. She is a regular broadcaster and podcaster, and, in 2017, was a judge for the Arthur C Clarke Award, given yearly for the best science fiction novel published in the UK. She lives in Cambridge with her partner, daughter and their Dalek. Her favourite television programme is **Blake's 7**.

Coming Soon

The Black Archive #24: The Time Warrior by Matthew Kilburn

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The Black Archive #27: The Face of Evil by Thomas Rodebaugh

The Black Archive #28: Love & Monsters by Niki Haringsma

The Black Archive #29: Warriors' Gate by Frank Collins

The Black Archive #30: Survival by Craig Jones

The Black Archive #31: The Impossible Astronaut / Day of the Moon
by John Toon

The Black Archive #32: The Romans by Jacob Edwards