

The Black Archive #4

DARK WATER /

DEATH IN

HEAVEN



By Philip Purser-Hallard

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Range Editor: Philip Purser-Hallard

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To Rachel Churcher, who might enjoy it

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‘HOW MAY I ASSIST YOU WITH YOUR DEATH?’: DEATH AND WHAT COMES AFTER

For a series whose stock-in-trade is violent death¹, **Doctor Who** is generally reluctant to explore its effects on those left behind. Bereavement is shown frequently, in the sense that we see a character die to whom another is related, romantically attached or otherwise close, but its consequences are usually confined to the immediate trauma (often because the bereaved are motivated towards short-term self-sacrifice as a result).

For the regular characters, such trauma is often visible, but there is little acknowledgement of long-term emotional impact. Companions in 20th-century **Doctor Who** are not infrequently recent orphans or lone survivors of massacres, but all of them – even Nyssa, who outlives not only her father and stepmother but her civilisation, her species and a large proportion of the neighbouring cosmos² – demonstrate remarkable emotional resilience. On the very rare occasions when the dead include a regular character – the most significant example being Nyssa’s contemporary Adric³ – their passing is marked at the time by

¹ The ‘Time Team’ feature in DWM #490 reported the cumulative count of onscreen deaths in **Doctor Who** up to and including *The End of Time* as 1,899, an average of around 9.5 deaths per story.

² In *The Keeper of Traken* and *Logopolis*.

³ Katarina (‘The Traitors’, *The Daleks’ Master Plan* episode 4, 1965), Kamelion (*Planet of Fire*) and Sara Kingdom (‘Destruction of Time’, *The Daleks’ Master Plan* episode 12, 1966) are killed after appearing in five, six and nine episodes respectively, compared with Adric’s 40 (*Earthshock*, 1982).

solemnity, then swiftly dismissed as a distraction from the matter in hand. They receive no funeral rites, their bodies tending to be conveniently pulverised, exploded or sucked out into space.

This is of course routine for an action-adventure series: no protagonist whose adventures brought them so habitually into contact with death could function if each passing left them paralysed with grief. *Black Orchid* (1982), a uniquely domestic and personal story for 20th-century **Doctor Who**, demonstrates its eccentricity by having the Doctor actually attend the funeral of the story's tragic, insane antagonist George Cranleigh – something he had apparently never thought to do in nearly 20 years of televised adventures, and rarely has since. The only prominent funerals in the 21st-century series have been the Reverend Fairchild's, which Miss Hartigan's Cybermen use as an opportunity to suborn the local gentry in *The Next Doctor*, and the informal private ceremonies for the Master and the Doctor in *Last of the Time Lords* and *The Impossible Astronaut*. Of these, one is for a character we never saw alive and the others for recurring characters who are not dead in any permanent sense at all.

Accordingly, when **Doctor Who** makes use of the iconography of human cultural responses to death, it more often serves as a colourful, historical or sinister backdrop than in its authentic, and emotionally essential, function. Tombs are more likely to be cavernous spaces where alien menaces lie dormant than reliquaries for the departed (as is the Master's funerary urn which the Doctor is tasked with returning to Gallifrey). Graveyards are sources of information about the past, or venues for sinister surprises like the one Miss Hartigan arranges – although occasionally they serve the former function for the viewer by showing a live character

mourning a deceased one⁴. Morgues are invariably places where the dead rise. Funeral parlours and undertakers, where they appear, are played for morbid comedy.

Two stories which deal in detail with the disposal of the dead are *Revelation of the Daleks* and *The Unquiet Dead*, both of them largely set in funeral homes. Though the former apparently takes its inspiration from Evelyn Waugh's post-War satire of American funeral customs, *The Loved One* (1948)⁵, and the latter openly from the works of Dickens, both stories end up treating their subject matter similarly, portraying undertakers as ghoulish grotesques and drawing black humour from the physical processes of decomposition. Both stories turn corpses into monsters – respectively Davros's new generation of Daleks and the vehicles of the gaseous Gelth. The parallel with *Dark Water / Death in Heaven* is closer in the case of *Revelation*, where the cryogenically-frozen dead are depicted as conscious, and have their minds subverted rather than their vacated cadavers hijacked. However, *Revelation*, like most of **Doctor Who**'s 1985 season, revels in the potential for body horror (also throwing in cannibalism and vaguely implied necrophilia⁶), and is nihilistically disinterested in transcending this in the way *Death in Heaven* does. *The Unquiet Dead* allows Dickens himself a redemptive ending, but extends no such kindness to the crass undertaker Sneed, let alone the Gelth themselves.

⁴ We see Clara at her mother's grave in *The Rings of Akhaten*, and Osgood at her duplicate's in *The Zygon Invasion*.

⁵ Howe, David, and Stephen James Walker, *Doctor Who: The Television Companion* p483.

⁶ See for instance Graham, Jack, 'Sex, Death & Rock 'n' Roll'.

Ben Aaronovitch's two scripts for Sylvester McCoy's seventh Doctor, *Remembrance of the Daleks* and *Battlefield*, are partial exceptions to the series' trivialising of death. While the former does feature an undertaker with a comedy Welsh accent who faints at the sight of a floating coffin – said coffin being, in fact, the disguise for a Gallifreyan super-weapon – the story nonetheless extends a dignity to the dead that *Revelation* denies them. On this occasion the Doctor and Ace duck out just before a funeral, but the final moments at least show us the mourners and coffin (a real one this time) entering the church, and the viewer can, if they wish, imagine the ceremony continuing into the credits. (As in *Black Orchid*, the deceased is not an ally of the Doctor's but a sympathetically portrayed human antagonist, the naïve neo-fascist Mike.) *Battlefield* has the Doctor complain of a nuclear missile's 'graveyard stench', and includes a scene set in a graveyard where the villain Morgaine, on encountering a war memorial, establishes a temporary truce with UNIT's forces to conduct a ceremony honouring the dead. Notably, in each of Aaronovitch's scripts one of the primary villains (the Black Dalek and Morgaine respectively) is talked into submission by an eloquent speech of the Doctor's about the fatal effects of war.

Battlefield also shows the Doctor's grief when he believes his friend the Brigadier has been killed, complicated by his foreknowledge that the Brigadier is 'supposed to die in bed'. *The Wedding of River Song* includes a scene where the 11th Doctor discovers that this has at last happened, and is tempted to give in to despair as a result. Moffat wrote the scene as a tribute to Nicholas Courtney (who died on 22 February 2011, seven months before its

broadcast), although he undercuts its solemnity somewhat with the character's post-mortem appearance in *Death in Heaven*.

Though not treating the subject with quite the same seriousness as Aaronovitch, Moffat has shown a greater interest in death and its trappings than most of his peers. Moffat's scripts deploy the iconography of death liberally, as witnessed by the fact that his most prominent additions to **Doctor Who's** bestiary, the Weeping Angels, are based on funerary statuary. Although his Doctor has remained stubbornly not dead, during Moffat's time as showrunner we have seen his funeral (*The Impossible Astronaut*, *The Wedding of River Song*), his tomb (*The Name of the Doctor*) and his will (in 2015, beginning with *The Magician's Apprentice*). Moffat's scripts for *Blink* (2007), *The Time of Angels / Flesh and Stone*, *The Angels Take Manhattan*, *The Snowmen* and *The Name of the Doctor* all featured scenes in graveyards before *Death in Heaven's*; *The Witch's Familiar* later shows us the Daleks' unpleasant equivalent.

Because of its particular emphasis on the dead, *Dark Water / Death in Heaven* makes even more extensive use of funereal iconography. As we have already seen, much of this is specific to the theme of wartime remembrance, but the fact that *Dark Water* is set largely in a mausoleum and *Death in Heaven* largely in a cemetery means that memorial imagery is more dominant than in any other **Doctor Who** story, *Revelation of the Daleks* and *The Unquiet Dead* not excepted. Notably, the characters we see who deal with death professionally – Dr Chang at 3W and Graham at the Chaplet Funeral

home⁷ – are played straight, with none of the earlier stories' gruesome caricature. Our constant awareness of Clara's loss (not to mention Danny's presence during the graveyard scenes) gives a context to this imagery which allows us to ascribe it its real-world connotations of mourning, as well as its genre-drama function as a setting for unnatural resurrections.

While he makes frequent use of its cultural accoutrements, however, and while the fear or anticipation of it looms large in a number of his stories, Moffat's evident respect for death makes him wary of deploying killing as a plot device with too much abandon. His first **Doctor Who** script, *The Empty Child / The Doctor Dances*, famously culminates with the Doctor's joyful declaration that 'Just this once, everybody lives!', but this observation – though it remains unusual in **Doctor Who** as a whole – applies to a number of his other stories, and is even repeated with elaboration by River at the end of *Silence in the Library / Forest of the Dead* ('Now and then, every once in a very long while, every day in a million days, when the wind stands fair and the Doctor comes to call... everybody lives'). His second script, *The Girl in the Fireplace*, contains only one explicit death, and that by natural causes (although the crewmembers whose remnants have been

⁷ There is no apparent reason for the funeral home to bear the surname of the first Doctor's companion Dodo Chaplet. (As James Cooray Smith points out in *The Black Archive #2: The Massacre*, the word refers to a rosary prayer, but has no strong funereal connotations.) One guess might be that the name, if it has any significance at all, is present as a rebuke to David Bishop's 1996 tie-in novel *Who Killed Kennedy*, which notoriously killed Dodo off in a brutal subplot, but this feels unsatisfactory.

cannibalised offscreen by the *SS Madame de Pompadour* are less likely to have died peacefully). Even the Weeping Angels are – at least when introduced in *Blink* – surprisingly merciful predators, allowing their victims to live out their allotted lifespans in the past, albeit cut off from the lives they knew previously.

While Moffat as showrunner has modified his approach, delivering episodes with considerably higher body counts, his scripts are still notable for their use of carefully constructed get-outs to ‘undo’ apparent deaths. The earliest of these are the ‘nanogenes’ in *The Empty Child / The Doctor Dances*, which initially turn their victims into gas-masked zombies – we assume fatally – but ultimately return them all to the bloom of health, even restoring an amputee’s leg. Later examples include the rebooting of the entire universe in *The Pandorica Opens / The Big Bang*, which restores everybody swallowed by the cracks in space; the shape-shifting robot with a miniaturised crew which helpfully stands in for the Doctor during his supposed death at Lake Silencio; and the death-ray-powered teleport device which (we will learn in *The Witch’s Familiar*) allows Missy to escape her apparent exterminations in *Death in Heaven* and *The Magician’s Apprentice*⁸.

⁸ We might also mention the Silurian technology with which Madame Vastra returns Strax and, briefly, Victorian-era Clara to life, but this is less a clever get-out than a straightforward cheat.

BIOGRAPHY

Black Archive series editor **Philip Purser-Hallard** gained his Oxford doctorate in English Literature with a thesis on ‘The Relationship between Creator and Creature in Science Fiction’.

He is the author of the urban fantasy thriller trilogy **The Devices** – *The Pendragon Protocol* (2014), *The Locksley Exploit* (2015) and *Trojans* (due in summer 2016) – about a war between present-day avatars of King Arthur and Robin Hood. His other published fiction includes two **Doctor Who** short stories and one featuring Sherlock Holmes, and stories and novellas occupying many of the more distant niches on the family tree of **Doctor Who** spinoffs.

He edits the **City of the Saved** short story anthologies for Obverse Books, set in the techno-utopian afterlife of his novel *Of the City of the Saved* (2004), and also edited the Obverse Books anthology *Iris Wildthyme of Mars* (2014). The British Fantasy Society described him as ‘the best-kept secret in British genre writing.’