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Adventures with the Wife in Space

Living with Dr Who

Written by Neil Perryman

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ADVENTURES WITH THE WIFE IN SPACE

Living with *Doctor Who*

NEIL PERRYMAN

with constant interruptions from Sue Perryman

from an idea that seemed like a good one
at the time by Neil Perryman

faber and faber

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I love my wife. I love *Doctor Who*. I believe my wife loves me. My wife does not love *Doctor Who*. I think I can make her change her mind about the latter without upsetting the delicate balance of the former. But do I have the right?

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Introduction

This story begins in a static caravan that was not, I can promise you, bigger on the inside.

I lived in this caravan (a Lyndhurst 2000) with my wife Sue, my teenage stepdaughter Nicol, a golden Labrador named Buffy, and a ginger tomcat named Gallifrey *for three and a half years*. I would have got less for manslaughter, which I considered a few times, because it was Sue's fault that we ended up living in the middle of nowhere, with frozen toilets, no telephone line and hardly enough room to swing Gallifrey. At least in prison I would have got a good night's sleep, especially when it rained.

We moved into this caravan in July 2004, and for eight months I focused exclusively on moving into a real house. However, on Sunday 6 March 2005 I had something to take my mind off our not-temporary-enough living arrangements.

Yes, *Doctor Who* was coming back. After a hiatus of sixteen years, the BBC had finally seen sense and commissioned a brand-new series. It was going to be amazing: thirteen episodes; a decent budget; a traditional Saturday evening timeslot; a respected and influential writer at the helm; Christopher Eccleston, one of the greatest actors of his generation, cast in the lead role; and the pop star Billie Piper as his companion, Rose Tyler.

As a *Doctor Who* fan, this made me very happy. (Except for the part about Billie Piper: that bit really worried me.)

If there were a scale that measured how much of a Whovian you are, where 1 is a Trekkie and 10 is someone who names their firstborn Adric, I'd be a 7, maybe even a 7.5. If the term Whovian didn't make me prickle with embarrassment, I would probably be an 8. However, in all conscience, I cannot award myself a 9. I cannot reel off production codes like some of my more specialist friends; it's been known for me to confuse the 1976 serial 'The Seeds of Death' with 1969's 'The Seeds of Doom'. Or is it the other way round? And, aside from a school cricket match in 1982, I've never consciously dressed up like the Doctor, an activity which must be considered the summit – or trough – of Whovianity, unless you happen to be one of the actors who have played the part. And I do know they are actors. Even more importantly, I possess some social skills. So I won't ever be a perfect 10.

On the other hand, I have studied for a PhD in the subject of *Doctor Who*. I have had a short story, which I set in an Ann Summers lingerie store, published in an officially licensed *Doctor Who* anthology. For six years I ran a website called Behind the Sofa. In addition to this, I've interviewed several *Doctor Who* actors and writers for a series of podcasts, my best friend has appeared in an episode of *Doctor Who* and I have been the guest at a wedding where the happy couple walked down the aisle to the accompaniment of the *Doctor Who* theme music played on the church organ. I even named an innocent cat Gallifrey. So I am not what you would call a 'casual fan'. I really, really like *Doctor Who*.

When I awoke that Sunday morning in 2005, and I learned that a Canadian had leaked the first episode of the

new series all over the internet, three weeks before it was due to turn up on BBC One, my celebratory dance set our caravan a-rocking. However, because – and this point bears repeating – we lived in a caravan without a broadband connection, I couldn't download it. In the end I had to beg a friend to send a copy over in a taxi. I made Sue and Nicol huddle around the laptop with me to watch it. Nicol made it as far as the scene with the belching wheelie bin before going outside to walk Buffy, but Sue stayed to the end.

That new episode of *Doctor Who* was great. No, actually it was *really* great – all the things *Doctor Who* can be when it's done right: scary, funny, exciting, thought-provoking, unique. When it was over, holding back tears of relief and joy, I asked my wife what she thought of it.

Sue: It was all right, I suppose.

And although neither of us realised it at the time, this was the beginning of a great idea.

*

In 2005 *Doctor Who* didn't just come back, it took over the world like one of its own villains. Suddenly everybody loved *Doctor Who*. Even my wife. Colleagues at work wanted to share their wild theories about the meaning of Bad Wolf – the story arc of that first season – and friends who had relentlessly taken the rise out of the programme when it wasn't on television were suddenly texting me to tell me how brilliant Billie Piper was. But of course she was. I always knew she would be. Ratings remained consistently high; Christmas Day became *Doctor Who* Day; even the most

highbrow critics heaped praise on it. For the first time since the 1970s, life without *Doctor Who* became unimaginable.

And if that weren't fantastic enough, I got to live in a real house again.

Skip forward to a Monday evening in late January. The year is 2011 and Matt Smith is the Doctor. I'm sitting on the sofa with Sue – in our real house – and we are trying to get into *Downton Abbey*.

Sue: Haven't you got a DVD we could watch instead? This is terrible.

Me: We could watch *Doctor Who*.

Sue: We've seen them all, haven't we?

Me: Not the new series. I mean old *Doctor Who*, the stuff I like.

Sue: Why would I want to do that?

I was talking about the original series of *Doctor Who*, which ran for twenty-six years and had been ignored by Sue for almost fifty. I had attempted to introduce her to it when we first met, but despite a positive reaction to 'Genesis of the Daleks', she hadn't paid much mind to vintage episodes of *Doctor Who* since then.

Me: We could watch from the very beginning. It might be fun. If we paced ourselves and watched one or two a night, it would only take a few months.*

Sue: I'll repeat the question: Why would I want to do that?

It was a very good question. But I had a very good answer:

* 'A few months' here = at least twenty-four.

Me: Look, fans embark on marathon viewings of *Doctor Who* all the time, but that's just the problem. *They're fans*.

Sue: I know. That's why they do it.

Me: Yes, but imagine if you could convince someone who hasn't seen the episodes to sit through them all? Someone who wouldn't know if a story was supposed to be good or bad before they'd even sat down to watch it; a person who didn't know what was coming next; a person who'd agree to watch the whole thing with an open mind and without prejudice. That's where you come in, Sue.

Sue: (*uncertainly*) Right . . .

But there was a catch:

Me: I want us to do it in public.

Sue: How many times, Neil? The answer to that will always be 'no'.

It was the twenty-first century, I told her. This was the age of the internet, where everyone shared everything, even if 90 per cent of it seemed to be related to cats. Why should we be any different? We could even include our own cats (we now had three: Captain Jack, Rose and Tegan; Gallifrey had died of old age). I also told her that *Doctor Who* fans loved the internet. If she could entertain them with her honesty, wit and swearing, she'd be performing a valuable public service by keeping them off the streets.

Me: Trust me, it will be brilliant.

I failed to mention that if we did this as a blog, and people actually read it, I could use that to pressure her into continuing when she inevitably begged me to stop.

Sue: But it would just be me telling you that old *Doctor Who* is crap. Why would anybody be interested in that? Give your head a shake, Neil.

Me: You might think it's not crap.

Sue: Oh. My. God.

Me: I'm guessing that 'ambitious' isn't the word you're looking for?

Sue: Oh dear. I know I'm not supposed to slag off the special effects, but come on! What were they thinking? Or taking?

Me: They were trying to push the envelope.

Sue: They're pushing their bloody luck.

Me: Well, not all of it anyway.

Sue: This is great. It's just a shame that the picture is overexposed. William Hartnell's face looks like it's melting off.

Me: This is a copy of the VHS tape that was released about ten years ago. The story is out on DVD soon. It will look better then.

Sue: We could watch it again.

Me: I beg your pardon?

Sue: I wouldn't mind watching this one again.

Me: Whatever happens, it would be nice for me to get a fresh perspective on *Doctor Who*. You never know, you might enjoy it.

Sue: Will I have to watch Jon Pertwee?

Me: Yes, but . . .

Sue: How long will Jon Pertwee take?

Me: About a month.*

Watching all of *Doctor Who* from the very beginning with my wife had never been a life-long ambition of mine but, as I gently reminded her, perhaps the thousand-plus days I had spent living in a static caravan so she could pursue her life-long ambition of building a house should be taken into account.

Sue: Payback, you mean.

Me: It might bring us closer together.

Sue: So did the caravan, and you didn't like that very much.

But in the end she agreed. After all, it was only watching TV. How hard could it be?

When we launched the blog Adventures With the Wife in Space, I called it an 'experiment', hoping to conjure up images of the Ludovico technique from *A Clockwork Orange* – leather restraints, bloodshot eyeballs, that sort of thing. But then something surprising happened. I quickly felt as though I was the one in the Ludovico chair. What was supposed to be a bit of inconsequential fun was now being scrutinised by a growing number of readers. Some of our

* 'About a month' = about five months.

audience thought we were engaged in an important ethnographic study, others enjoyed the way Sue would say things a fan wouldn't usually say, or notice things a fan wouldn't usually notice (invariably involving the quality of an episode's carpentry). And in turn, as 'a few months' stretched to over two years, Sue never thought about giving up and letting our followers down. Not once. She never begged me to stop, not even when Captain Jack had a life-threatening urinary tract infection.* She was indomitable.

I, on the other hand, proved laughably domitable. In the two years the experiment took to run, I thought about giving up before, after or during nearly every episode. But I couldn't – it was me who felt pressured into continuing because it was all happening online. People were commenting, arguing and watching us. We were being monitored by an enthusiastic panel of 8s, 9s and even some 10s who converted Sue's scores for each story into statistical data and bar charts. And as we slogged our way through 157 different stories and nearly 700 different episodes – including more than a hundred that technically didn't exist any more – something even more surprising happened.

Strapped to our sofa, eyes fixed forcibly on the TV, I began seriously to rethink my love for *Doctor Who*, a love that began forty years ago.

* The cat, not John Barrowman.