

“Surprising Us with the Familiar”

Book review of *The Mythological Dimensions of Doctor Who*

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As Simon Guerrier points out in the Foreword, *Doctor Who* is all about “surprising us with the familiar,” and that’s exactly what this book does. Quickly glancing through the table of contents, I see several familiar authors who contributed essays or commentaries, including Guerrier, Anne Petty, C. B. Harvey, and Matt Hills. Any *Doctor Who* fan will feel at home recalling pivotal plot points or beloved companions. Readers don’t have to be familiar with everything since that first broadcast in 1963, however, because many essayists emphasize the recent Russell T. Davies era. (*Torchwood* fans can even find several references to Captain Jack Harkness, back to the future when he traveled with the Ninth and Tenth Doctors.)

What may be surprising is the depth of each topic’s treatment within a fan-friendly book. This volume doesn’t skimp on the *Mythological*, and scholars who study myths and their significance historically or to modern storytelling and culture won’t be disappointed. These authors don’t attempt to convince readers that *Doctor Who* is worthy of such study—they clearly analyze the elements that make *Doctor Who* an important modern myth and compare it to the structures and interpretations of other well-known classic tales.

Readers familiar with the Doctor’s adventures likely will be surprised at the many links between a TV series (and its many multimedia tangential stories) and classic literature. Within this book, the Doctor is compared with such illustrious characters as Prometheus, Merlin, and Gandalf. RTD-era fans may expect Rose to be discussed as one of the Doctor’s most important companions, but analysis of her in light of the Valkyrie tradition is unexpected.

For all that the Doctor is the key character and focus of this book, his female companions receive a lot of attention. Kristine Larsen’s “Doctor Who and the Valkyrie Tradition Part 1: The Valiant Child and the Bad Wolf” and Jessica Burke’s Part 2, “Goddesses, Battle-demons, Witches, & Wives,” emphasize the classic roles of women in literature and the ways that not only Rose, but Martha, Donna, and even River Song meet or defy expectations.

This book brings together many of my favorite authors and texts—Mallory’s *Le Morte D’Artur* and Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* among them—with one of my all-time favorite TV series. The essayists provide enough detail about literary criticism (e.g., by Tolkien scholars Verlyn Flieger and Thomas Shippey) and the structure of myth (e.g., by Joseph Campbell) that I know they know what they’re writing about, and they clearly document their work so that fan-scholars can track down sources or follow up the discussion in this book with more research of their own. (The comprehensive Bibliography is 11 pages.) Essays discussing the Doctor or episodes in light of literary classics and well-established myths might be expected, but they also offer new perspectives on old friends. I particularly liked Barnaby Edwards’ overview of the Doctor as a mythic figure given greater prominence in the RTD era (“The Mythology of a Legend”) and Anthony S. Burdge’s comparison between the Doctor and Gandalf

("The Professor's [Tolkien's] Lessons for the Doctor: The Doctor's Sub-creative Journey Toward Middle-earth").

Yet another surprise is the length and depth of discussions to answer such basic questions as What is a myth? How do the current definition of and approach to a study of mythology compare with those of previous generations? How does a TV series' canon help or hurt the construction of myth—and just what should be considered "canon" in *Doctor Who* anyway? and, most important, How does *Doctor Who* serve as a myth? Although all chapters provide insightful responses to these questions, I found C. B. Harvey's chapter on "Canon, Myth, and Memory in Doctor Who" and Matthew Hills' essay ("Mythology Makes You Feel Something': The Russell T. Davies Era as Sentimental Journey") especially useful to my own study and teaching of mythology and popular culture.

Harvey examines the problems of establishing canon in a long-running story likely to introduce a continuity error somewhere along the line, especially a series encouraging the development of stories in formats other than *Doctor Who* episodes (e.g., Big Finish audios, comic books, spinoff TV series). Compounding the problem is a fandom eager to build on or deviate from BBC-presented canon.

In his essay, Hills explains trends in studying myth and the many ways in which myths in general, as well as the mythic elements of *Doctor Who*, can or should be analyzed. He suggests "approaching myth as a set of binaries (e.g., alien/human; man/woman)," a pragmatic way to better understand story developments during the RTD era. Essays such as these provide a context for defining terms like *canon* or *myth* and a practical approach to making meaning from the series' many "texts."

As Anne Petty notes on one of the last pages, "we Whovians are a demanding and discerning lot." I don't agree with every author's every comment, but that's part of the book's value to me as a fan and a researcher/writer. I also can quibble that the book has a few typos or the Index doesn't include Chris Eccleston's name. I question the need for quite so much prefatory material (a Foreword, Preface, and Introduction), although I liked each one. Overall, though, the authors effectively tackle such a monumental topic as mythology and nearly 50 years of *Doctor Who*, and the book's structure and supplementary materials are quite useful.

The editors hope that readers finish the book "with more questions than answers, and will be motivated to ponder the answers to these questions for themselves." Perhaps that is the best measure of a good book: readers interact with the information and want to return to glean more insights. Although I enjoyed my first reading of *The Mythological Dimensions of Doctor Who* because the authors explore and celebrate familiar characters, episodes, and themes, I've already returned twice to re-read particular essays and question an author's—and my—interpretations and comments. The essays make me want to continue the discussion, and that is high praise indeed.