

Female Doctors

A personal fandom journey by **Louise Dennis**

THE CONCEPT OF A FEMALE DOCTOR WHO FIRST FLOATED ACROSS THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION WHEN TOM BAKER FAMOUSLY WISHED HIS SUCCESSOR LUCK ‘WHOEVER HE OR SHE MIGHT BE’. I wish I could say I had a clear memory of what I thought about this. This was several months before I first bought a copy of *Doctor Who Monthly* (as *Doctor Who Magazine* then was) and began to consider myself a ‘fan’ of the show. I do remember the remark being discussed in fan circles, mostly as a famous tease rather than a serious proposition, but I don’t recall either excitement or horror. I think I just considered it a joke and got on with worrying about more important matters, like UNIT dating.

Kim Binsted is the Doctor!

Nearly fifteen years later, in 1994, I would be studying for a PhD in Artificial Intelligence at the University of Edinburgh. Kim Binsted was in the year above me and had picked the extremely cool PhD topic of getting a computer program to generate jokes. I seem to recall it got very good at lame puns.

Q What do you call a television show about Weetabix?

A A cereal serial.



A newspaper cutting showing Kim Binsted as the Doctor in *Doctor Who: The Final Score* at the Bedlam Theatre, Edinburgh, in 1994. Thanks to Kim and to Kate O'Mara.

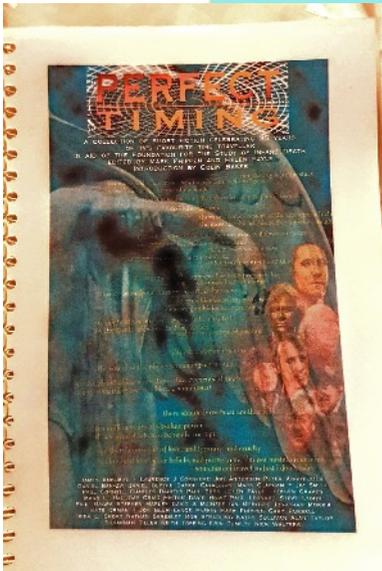
Unsurprisingly perhaps, Kim spent her spare time on the amateur stand-up and drama circuits. It was through Kim that I first saw Mitch Benn live when he was one half of ‘Kendal Mitch Cake’. And it was because of Kim that a whole group of us ended up watching a performance of *Doctor Who: The Final Score* at the student-run Bedlam Theatre. I recall being somewhat dubious

about this. It was to feature three Doctors (one female and played by Kim) and I vaguely recall her reassuring me that the play had been written by ‘a fan’ who knew his stuff.

Of the three actors playing the Doctor, Kim was the best. After that point, I was firmly in favour of the existence of a female Doctor at some point. There’s probably nothing like watching two fairly mediocre male Doctors and one much better female one in the same production to convince one that gender is not a defining feature of the role. I liked Kim’s stylish outfit (leggings and tails, if I remember correctly), her businesslike air and her exasperation with everyone’s initial first reaction: ‘but you’re a woman’. If I remember correctly the Brigadier only got as far as ‘but you’re a...’ before the Doctor narrowed her eyes and said, ‘just don’t.’



Louise’s photograph of the flyer for *Doctor Who: The Final Score*, Bedlam Theatre, Edinburgh, 22-26 November 1994.



The editor’s photograph of their copy of *Perfect Timing*, featuring *Dark Paragon* by Jon Andersen. On the basis of this article it deserves a revisit.

Dark Paragon

Four years later fandom was deep into the hiatus. The torchbearers of the show were the novels and audios and the lines between professional and fan writers were blurred almost to the point of invisibility. *Perfect Timing* was a charity anthology edited by Mark Phippen and Helen Fayle. It sparked a flurry of similar fan-edited collections which continues to this day. The last story in *Perfect Timing* is *Dark Paragon* by Jon Andersen, a lyrically written tale of a human woman who has taken on the mantle of the Doctor, following the death of the original. It gets inside the Doctor’s mind and experience in a way that is difficult to do convincingly with the alien from the show. Andersen followed this with *Grey* in *Perfect Timing 2* edited by Helen Fayle and Jay Eales.

The Doctor from these stories has psychic powers that allow her to bend reality just a little and just

when needed. They are deliberately ambiguous about the extent to which these powers are innate but enhanced through contact with the Doctor, and the extent to which she has gained them on becoming the Doctor. *Dark Paragon* explicitly explores her feelings about her predecessor, with a particular emphasis on some of the Doctor's more dubious actions from the novels. *Grey* is something closer to a traditional *Doctor Who* story, though it too focuses heavily on the Doctor's mixed feelings about her role.

However the character, despite being a woman, despite being human, despite regrets and doubts, is nevertheless recognisably the Doctor.

They were among my favourite stories in the anthologies. In, I think deliberately, setting out to explore the boundaries of what it meant to be the Doctor, they successfully illustrated once again that being male was not one of their defining characteristics.

Etheric beam locators

Into the middle of all this dropped the Comic Relief special with Joanna Lumley as the Doctor. *The Curse of Fatal Death* is an interesting piece of *Doctor Who* history. It is intended to be funny, but it treats its parent show with a great deal of respect and in many ways feels like an episode of the show. In fact, one feels something like it could well have been shown during the Hartnell era when the show was still veering about stylistically and was not afraid to occasionally present itself as farce or comedy. Of its five Doctors some are more one note, or perhaps single joke, than others but one of the interesting things about Joanna Lumley's final female incarnation is that while jokes are made about her being a woman 'Dalek bumps' the fact that she is a woman isn't the joke in and of itself.

Besides which, Joanna Lumley would clearly make an excellent Doctor.

Doctor Who: Time Lady

The first attempt to depict the Doctor as a woman which I remember coming across was *Doctor Who - Time Lady*, a series of comic strips in the fanzine *Star Begotten*. *Star Begotten* began in 1987, turning into 625 in 1993 and ending the following year. It was a *Doctor Who*-led television, drama, fantasy and SF fanzine which took itself seriously, and its humour was often satirical and sometimes too bleak for some.

Doctor Who: Time Lady was written and drawn by Kenneth Horlock. Its first instalment, published in issue 16 (February 1991) contrasts two depictions of womanhood. One is Ace, who has always lived as female, but who finds herself dismissed as naïve, a ruffian and a tomboy by the new Doctor. The other is the Doctor herself, regenerated from Sylvester McCoy into Joanna Lumley (almost a decade before *The Curse of Fatal Death*) and keen to explore the role she thinks society will accord her as 'glamorous', 'beautiful' and possessor of a woman's 'cute little ways'. Instead, Ace has to rescue her from being picked up by the Master at a club.

This seems very much a male view of a woman's life, with the Doctor blindsided by 'strange feelings, emotions', at first unable to recognize the Master, and then thinking that while he is 'despicable... murderous' he has 'the cutest smile'. Later instalments saw the Master propose marriage to the Doctor. The Doctor, rationalizing that her femininity somehow encouraged the Master away from evil, accepted! I've wondered whether Steven Moffat read *Star Begotten*... **Matthew**



Kim Binsted is the Doctor (in fanfiction)

I liked Jon Andersen's stories so much that when I pitched a story to Jay Eales for his next charity anthology, *Walking in Eternity*, I wanted to use Andersen's female Doctor. Jay was dubious about this. He had commissioned an illustration for *Grey* and been surprised when Andersen reacted badly to the attempt to depict his Doctor. Jay said he would publish the story but only if Andersen agreed to my use of the character.¹ I contacted Andersen who, as Jay had predicted, refused permission outright for any use of his female Doctor.

Somewhat rebelliously, since I always find it bizarre when fanfiction writers get possessive about the characters they have created, I set about re-writing my story. I still wanted to use a female Doctor, but instead of Andersen's regretful and troubled successor to the Doctor, I based my version on Kim Binsted's businesslike, mildly exasperated interpretation of the original character. Part of what I wanted to do was convey my conviction, based on both *The Final Score* and *Dark Paragon/Grey*, that a female Doctor really worked. I'm not sure I really succeeded, a review at the time justly noted that I was trying to do way too much with the story (which also featured a partly Cyberised Lytton as the companion, and was set during the Battle of Agincourt). *The Feast of Saint Crispin Crispianus* can now be found on AO3 for those interested in judging for themselves.²

Whittaker's World

Fast forward to this summer. I was not expecting a woman to be cast. I suspected that the BBC would, rightly or wrongly, believe that the show's wider audience considered gender far too essential a part of character to readily accept a change. I did think that the clamour for a Doctor who wasn't a white man had grown sufficiently loud that they would also be cautious about casting another a white man in the part. Leaving aside press speculation and bookies' odds, I considered the most likely choice would be a British Asian actor. It would allow the show to continue to centre around someone vaguely definable as an English gentleman and let it riff (for good or ill) on the themes of Victoriana and Empire to which it often returns.

I was genuinely surprised, therefore, when Jodie Whittaker was revealed as the Thirteenth Doctor. Obviously I was not horrified, but I didn't have the overwhelming sense of joy and amazement that so many female fans have reported. I am pleased, but the concept of a female Doctor has been very much part of the background noise of my fannish experience. I was sold the idea as a workable reality in a small theatre in Edinburgh in 1994 and have had twenty-three years to get used to it.

¹ I hasten to add, at this point, that this is only my recollection of events from over fifteen years ago. I have long ago lost track of all the emails involved so the finer points of exactly what was said to whom about what are long gone.

² <http://archiveofourown.org/works/67642>