

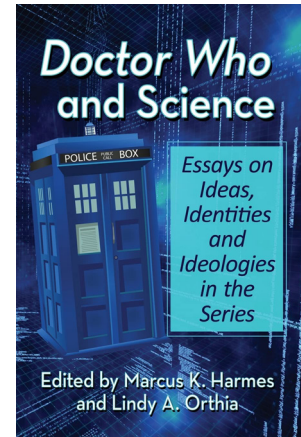
Doctor Who and Science: Essays on Ideas, Identities and Ideologies in the Series, edited by Marcus K. Harmes and Lindy A. Orthia



John McLoughlin

Marcus K. Harmes and Lindy A. Orthia, editors. *Doctor Who and Science: Essays on Ideas, Identities and Ideologies in the Series*, McFarland & Company Inc., 2021. Ebook. 235 pg. \$39.95. ISBN 9781476642000.

This collection presents a distinctly interdisciplinary set of essays, the vast majority of which testify to the significant scholarly and personal investment of their authors in *Doctor Who*, both as a modern series and a historical institution. As the editors themselves note, “academics tend not to write about *Doctor Who* unless they are also fans or at least highly engaged viewers” (14). This particular set of expert fans includes physicists, translation professionals, media and cultural scholars, astronomers, geneticists, science communicators, literature specialists, historians and more, so the collection has an interesting variety of methodological approaches beyond those usually seen in traditional literary and cultural studies. Alongside critical analyses of *Doctor Who* episodes are quantitative analyses of public engagement, exposition of scientific norms and cutting-edge gender and identity discourses.



Despite this open-ended attitude to content, the curatorial approach is distinctly of the modern humanities, with an emphasis on explicating *Doctor Who*’s complex and often illuminating relationship with issues around gender, sexual and racial representation, and empire. The editors get the question of pronouns out of the way early, mandating the use of they/them when speaking of the Doctor generally, but allowing for gendered usage when referencing a specific incarnation. Despite the potential—acknowledged by the editors—for the odd instance of grammatical confusion, this two-pronged approach is largely effective and engages admirably with the show’s own development and modern innovations in gender inclusivity.

Focus is laid on the show’s function as a science communicator, rather than simply recording instances of scientific accuracy—or inaccuracy—in specific episodes; *Doctor Who* can, the editors argue, serve only to proselytize for science at the “macro” level, introducing reason and scientific method as general concepts (6). Despite this, essays do occasionally go as far as equating the show’s quality with its faithfulness to real science. Elizabeth Stanway’s “Who’s Moon” talks about the show’s “recklessly indifferent” attitude toward scientific fact (41) in the 2014 episode “Kill the Moon”; lack of faithfulness to microbiological and astrophysical reality, Stanway argues,

indicates “a decline in the quality of scientific and educational representation of the Moon” (41), thus introducing one of the more interesting questions raised by the collection—to what extent *Doctor Who* must balance its responsibility to science communication with its nature as creative fiction. Stanway frames this within the show’s influence on audience’s attitudes towards science specifically, a perspective supported and built upon by Kristine Larsen’s analysis in the same volume of the “chilling effect” (127) such shows can have on women’s participation in STEM fields. Stanway’s analysis of Google search trends is far from conclusive when it comes to demonstrating the show’s impact on viewer interest, though the inclusion of real-world events alongside episode broadcast dates is an intelligent and necessary one.

Whether it be issues of climate change, space sovereignty or gender inclusivity, one of the collection’s most compelling arguments is that *Doctor Who* has, for better or worse and throughout its history, contributed to public perceptions of science and scientists. The collection does an admirable job of balancing its conclusions: while *Doctor Who* is not without flaws, sharing many of them with the culture which gave birth to it, nevertheless the authors seem to believe that it may still serve a vanguard function. Larsen’s own essay, “The Mad Scientist Wore Prada,” offers a balanced and intriguing analysis of Rosalynn Haynes’ catalogue of feminine stereotypes as they appear in *Doctor Who*. Larsen’s analyses of the Rani and the Master/ Missy are nuanced and thorough, extending far beyond a simple reiteration of Haynes’ initial list; sections dealing with Missy’s emotional response to the Doctor’s friendship and her own rehabilitation are particularly astute, noting the cart-before-the-horse nature of the writing; she asks whether such an emotionally charged Master would be possible in the Moffat era were they not so overtly feminine, and the reader is inclined to agree. Larsen’s conclusion, that the presence of these stereotypes harms inclusivity, is strengthened by the recorded instances of backlash to gender inclusion in the show from fans and critics, though Larsen does acknowledge that by approaching only the “mad scientist” characters, analysis is funneled towards characters whose depiction must—by necessity—be negative.

The collection’s more niche and episode-specific studies most demonstrate the strength of passion-driven scholarship; Harmes and Scully’s close study of the “Evil of the Daleks” serial and its depiction of Victorian-era science and pseudoscience offers fascinating insights into the production methodology of old *Who*, the real-life emergence of professional scientists, and the demise of the amateur, gentrified scientist. Essays like Natalie Ring’s regeneration piece and Halley and Bowker’s translation study offer fun and well-rounded explorations of the real-life parallels to *Doctor Who*’s soft-SF themes and ideas, whilst Mike Stack offers a nuanced and intricate study of the differences between sex and gender—all framed neatly by the regenerative process.

Editorial work is largely accurate, with tables and visual information presented appropriately. A small number of typographical and grammatical oddities remain, including incorrect punctuation usage in chapter titles. In all, readers will find in this volume a varied and thoroughly researched set of essays whose topical and enthusiastic approach demonstrates the versatility and longevity of *Doctor Who* scholarship.

John McLoughlin is a PhD researcher at Cardiff University studying the intersection between the Exegesis of Philip K. Dick and the literary and philosophical writing of Walter Benjamin. McLoughlin is interested in cultural detritus, nonlinear approaches to art and revelation, and alternative cultural and literary perspectives. Originally from Liverpool, John is a lifelong SF fan and fine artist with a keen interest in interdisciplinary studies, plus a passion for bringing unlikely sources of meaning together.