

My time as a 'scary girl' on Doctor Who

Written by Julie Collins, Lecturer in Indigenous studies, University of New England



Sylvester McCoy was Doctor Who in 1987, when Julie Collins appeared as Leader of the Red Kangs in the TV show. BBC films

In 1987, I appeared as Fire Escape, the Leader of the Red Kangs, in a Doctor Who tale of dystopian mayhem: Paradise Towers. In a dilapidated Tower Block, colour-coded gangs of "Kangs" - delinquent teenage girls - ran amok, whilst behind closed doors, sweet and endearing old ladies lured unsuspecting visitors into their apartment for tea, so that they could eat them.

The Kangs became allies of the Doctor - [number seven](#) , played by Sylvester McCoy - who went on to defeat the Hitler-like totalitarian Chief Caretaker, played by veteran British actor Richard Briers. The fans both loved and hated this story. The acting was at times way over the top. But on the plus side, Paradise Towers, a storyline written by Stephen Wyatt, contained great social commentary, critiquing the social upheaval of Thatcher's Britain. The Kangs were seriously "scary girls", and the streets were full of them.

The news this week that a woman - [English actor Jodie Whittaker](#) - will be the 13th Doctor Who has got me thinking about my time on the set of this classic show. Whittaker's appointment to the role has been hailed by many and criticised by some purists. I think that it is about time a Wise Woman took control of the Tardis, even if the Tardis does not always do as it's told these days. Reflecting on my brief time on the show, it is interesting that while women such as the Kangs were feisty, the Doctor's female companions were there mostly to help show how clever he was.



The author as Fire Escape in 1987. author provided

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My own personal association with Doctor Who - apart from hiding behind the couch as a very small person - began in the mid 1980s, when my partner at the time, Mark Strickson, was cast as Turlough, companion to the fifth Doctor, played by Peter Davison. I was so jealous! But over the next few years, I probably spent almost as much time on the set as Mark did. This was the era when John Nathan Turner (known as JNT) was the producer and the series was probably at its most economical.

Production was fast and furious. But despite the pressures, I was welcome on location and in the studio. I watched from the sidelines and even from the control room. One day when I entered the studio, the Daleks were there. They were really very scary, even though you knew the voices were coming from four small and elderly gentlemen sitting at a table in the corner with large microphones.

When I eventually got the call to audition for my own story on Doctor Who, it was unlike any audition I'd been to. Instead of sitting across a desk, having a quiet chat and perhaps reading a few lines of script, which was the norm, JNT and the director, Nicholas Mallett, had overturned the furniture and I was asked to improvise a life and death battle.

Working on Paradise Towers was hard work. You had to stay focussed; if at 10pm, your concentration was about to lapse, the production team was unlikely to retake a shot to fix up your performance.

One of the episodes in which Fire Escape appeared.

This was only Sylvester's second outing as the Doctor, and he was quite nervous at times but his background as a stand up comic helped - and his wry sense of humour came to define his portrayal.

I met many of the Doctors over the years: the quietly dignified Pat Troughton; the charming Jon Pertwee; the ascerbic Tom Baker; the very kind Peter Davison; and the flamboyant Colin Baker.

In recent years, I also met Paul McGann, the eighth Doctor, who appeared in the movie, and he told me a story that shows how the character has evolved over the years.

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The Doctor began his existence as a typical white, upper middle class, patriarchal male. While the casting of Peter Davison in 1981 sent shock waves through the BBC - I mean how could you have a young Doctor? - he was still the wise and nicely spoken patriarch.



Paul McGann as Doctor Who in 1996. BBC

McGann told me that when he was cast as Doctor Who, in 1996, he suggested that he play him as a Northerner in a leather jacket. But the producers insisted he play the Doctor as an Edwardian gentleman.

Yet in 2005, Christopher Eccleston became the ninth Doctor - as a Northerner in a leather jacket. The Doctor was no longer quite so posh.

Peter Capaldi who played the Doctor from 2013 until now, might be seen as a return to the old model - the mature patriarch - apart from the fact he is Scottish. And yet Capaldi is quite different, more reflective, more self doubting. Ironically, considering the Doctor is not human, this incarnation seems more human and in need of support from his companions. For this reason, he is my favourite Superhero. The Doctor is in a sense Everyman and therefore, Everywoman.

The idea that Time Lords can change genders has already been established, and the Doctors can remember all their previous incarnations, so I do not think the change to a female Doctor will be earth shattering. Maybe Doctor number 14 will be a person of colour, that would be exciting.

Postscript: After appearing in four Doctor Who episodes, the author went on to study zoology and do a PhD in ecological humanities ... as you do.

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Julie Collins occasionally receives minor royalties from her appearance on Doctor Who.

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