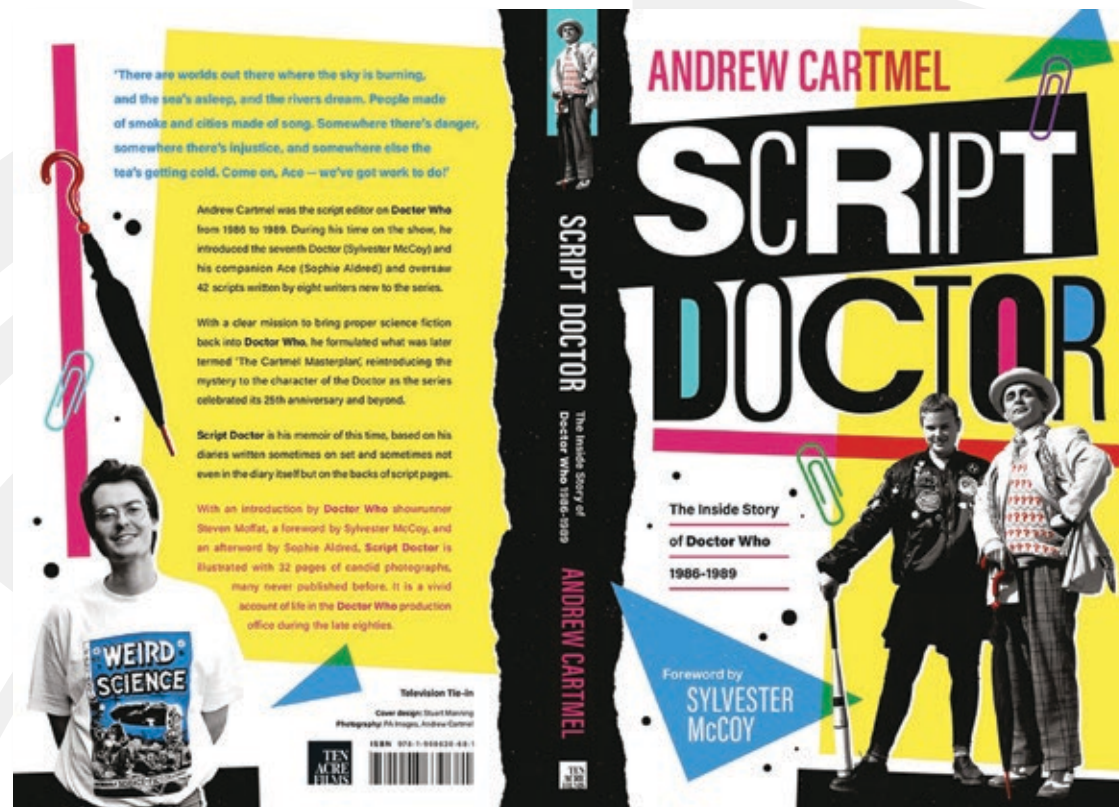
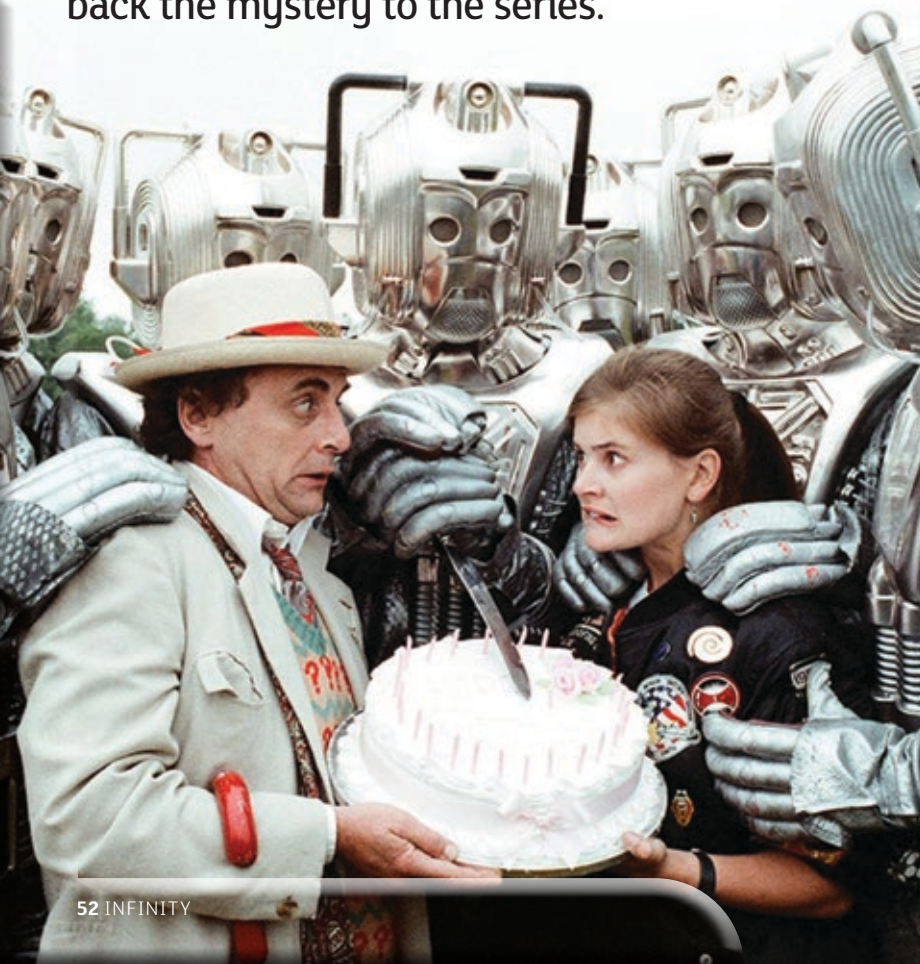




DOCTOR WHO AND THE CARTMEL MASTERPLAN

Neil Oseman revisits the Sylvester McCoy era of classic *Doctor Who* and looks at the efforts of script editor Andrew Cartmel to bring back the mystery to the series.



1986

was a difficult year for *Doctor Who*. BBC 1 Controller Michael Grade, who made no bones of hating the 23-year-old sci-fi series, had put it on an 18-month hiatus which had prompted a huge fan backlash, a bombastic *Sun* headline “Dr Who is axed in a BBC plot” and even a charity single.

Production resumed with the season-long story arc *The Trial of a Time Lord*, but script editor Eric Saward had stormed out, and producer John Nathan-Turner was ordered by Grade to fire the leading man, Colin Baker, whose arrogant and violent sixth Doctor had proven unpopular.

The show had twice been shunted from Saturday teatimes to a mid-week slot, episodes had been extended to 45 minutes then contracted back to 25, and ratings had fallen from 15 million at peak Tom Baker to a miserable five million.

Into the troubled *Doctor Who* office came 28-year-old Andrew Cartmel. He had all but given up on his dream of writing for TV when his agent heard from his old friend Nathan-Turner that he was in desperate need of a new script editor. After an interview with BBC Head of Drama Jonathan Powell, in which he was firmly told that *Doctor Who* was for children, Cartmel got the job.

The much-maligned *Time and the Rani*, which introduces Sylvester McCoy as the seventh Doctor, is the first story to bear Cartmel’s name. However, it had been commissioned from veteran writers Pip and Jane Baker before he joined and did not represent the direction he wanted to take the series in.

Influenced by sci-fi authors like Robert A. Heinlein and Ray Bradbury, and Alan Moore comics like *Swamp Thing* and *The Ballad of Halo Jones*, Cartmel was keen to bring in new writers. “Because I’d been given this wonderful chance and I’d been battering at the door for years trying to get in, I felt that I had to give other people a chance too,” he told the *New to Who* podcast in 2018.

Malcolm Kohll and Ian Briggs, who wrote the season 24 stories *Delta* and *the Bannermen* and *Dragonfire* respectively, had attended workshops alongside Cartmel at the BBC Drama Script Unit, an initiative to foster upcoming talent.

Dragonfire introduced new companion Ace, one of the few classic companions to do more than scream and ask questions. Played by Sophie Aldred, Ace was a



tough, street-smart, contemporary kid with a baseball bat and a rucksack full of homemade “Nitro 9” explosives. Contrary to the received wisdom of *Doctor Who* writing, which tended to split up the Doctor and companion to pursue multiple plot threads, Cartmel encouraged writers to keep them together so that their relationship could develop.

DOING THE DARK SIDE

As season 25 began, changes were also evident in the Doctor’s character. “I did want to bring in the tragedy of his longevity, and the terrible things he’d seen,” McCoy told the *Radio Times* in early 2021. “It’s much more fun trying to do the dark side, especially if you’re known as a comic person, because, you know, the other side of a comic’s coin is tragedy.”

The script editor wanted to take *Doctor Who* right back to its roots. “He had started off in 1963 in the shape of William Hartnell as a scary enigma, a being of unlimited mystery,” Cartmel noted in his 2005 memoir,

Script Doctor. He believed that stories like *The Deadly Assassin* (1976), which established the Doctor’s home planet, Gallifrey, as a dull, stuffy world mired in turgid politics, had robbed the central character of his uniqueness. By the time Cartmel joined the show, the Doctor had been reduced to “the kind of chump who could be put on trial by the other Time Lords, and generally be pushed around with impunity.”

Collaborating with Ian Briggs and other new talent like Ben Aaronovitch (*Remembrance of the Daleks*, *Battlefield*) and Stephen Wyatt (*Paradise Towers*, *The Greatest Show in the Galaxy*), Cartmel ushered in a “new, more mysterious, powerful and shadowy Doctor”.

It was a move that would become known to fandom as “The Cartmel Masterplan”.

The writers peppered seasons 25 and 26 with tantalising hints of a rich and hitherto-unsuspected back-story for the Doctor. He is Merlin. He has battled Norse Gods.



He banished Fenric into the Shadow Dimensions. He is even, perhaps, a founder of Time Lord society.

In *Remembrance of the Daleks*, discussing the powerful Omega Device which powered Gallifrey’s early time-travel experiments, the Doctor remarks, “And didn’t we have trouble with the prototype?” “We?” asks Ace. “They,” the Doctor hastily corrects himself.

“I am far more than just another Time Lord,” he tells Dalek creator Davros in a later scene which was deleted from most versions. Aaronovitch’s novelisation goes further, showing in flashbacks how “The Other” (strongly implied to be the Doctor) helped Omega and Rassilon design the stellar manipulation technology which turned their race into Time Lords.

Silver Nemesis, the 25th anniversary story, similarly hints that this triumvirate of founders created the living metal validium, which is coveted by 17th century sorceress Lady Peinforte. In one of the classic series’ most chilling moments, Peinforte threatens to reveal the Doctor’s darkest secrets: “I shall tell them of Gallifrey, tell them of the old time, the time of chaos.”

Early drafts of *Ghost Light* – the final story to be produced for the classic series

Opposite top:
A scene from *Trial of a Time Lord*

Opposite below:
Sylvester McCoy’s Doctor with Sophie Aldred’s Ace in a *Silver Nemesis* publicity still

Clockwise from above:
McCoy and Sophie Aldred in *Dragonfire*; Aldred in *Remembrance of the Daleks*; Andrew Cartmel’s book; McCoy with Kate O’Mara and Bonnie Langford in *Time and the Rani*



— took place at the Doctor's ancestral home and revealed much more of this back-story, but producer Nathan-Turner vetoed this version. It later surfaced in Marc Platt's Lungbarrow novel for the *Virgin New Adventures* series.

RESETTING THE MYSTERY

The similarities between Cartmel's ideas and the recent *Doctor Who* have not gone unnoticed. Current show-runner Chris Chibnall divided the fans in 2020 with *The Timeless Children's* revelation that the Doctor is a founding from whom Gallifreyans stole the power of regeneration, the power on which Time Lord society is built.

Some media outlets like Screen Rant published articles claiming that Chibnall's arc was a completion of the Cartmel Masterplan at last, a link the man himself vigorously denied. "The crucial thing is that [the



masterplan] would never build to any kind of revelation," Cartmel said, early drafts of *Ghost Light* notwithstanding. "My idea was to reset the mystery and leave it at that."

And indeed it was left at that. While seasons 25 and 26 were a cut above the show's previous few years, the efforts of Cartmel and his writers ultimately came too late. "No matter how hard we tried or how good the scripts were, what ended up on the screen was all too often a travesty of our intentions," he wrote in his memoir. The tiny special effects budget and the rushed, outdated multi-camera shooting style were letting down the writing, and viewers who had drifted away during Colin Baker's



troubled tenure were not returning.

The axe finally fell on *Doctor Who* in 1989, with the last transmitted story of the classic era being *Survival* (written by Rona Munro, who would return to the series 28 years later to script the 12th Doctor adventure *The Eaters of Light*). Ideas for a 27th season had already been floated but not scripted, including the departures of Ace and McCoy's Doctor, and the return of classic monsters the Ice Warriors.

The Cartmel Masterplan may have failed to save the series, but it was somewhat vindicated by its echoes in the era of Russell T. Davies, the show-runner behind the spectacularly successful 2005 relaunch. Like Ace, Billie Piper's Rose is a working-class Londoner with a fleshed-out character and a developing relationship to the Doctor. Like McCoy's Doctor, Christopher Eccleston's drops hints of a dark back-story (the Time War) and is unique amongst Time Lords (the only survivor).

Silver Nemesis ends with Ace asking, "Doctor who?" and the Doctor simply putting his finger to his lips in reply. In Steven Moffat's era as show-runner this became a recurring theme, the so-called "First Question". Over nearly six decades we have learnt a lot about the wandering Time Lord, but as the show's title suggests, ultimately he must always remain a mystery. 🦋

Top:
The Doctor and his old enemies in *Remembrance of the Daleks*

Above right:
McCoy in *Survival*, the last transmitted story of the classic era