

Chapter 40

The legacy of the fanzine Renaissance by Leslie McMurtry

Original to this volume

What is the past, present, and future of *Doctor Who* fanzines? Leslie McMurtry, editor, examines how important fanzines have been, are, and will continue to be in *Doctor Who*'s ongoing life.

*In front of you, you have yet another edition of **The Terrible Zodin** for your delectation. [...] Remind yourself as you read that no one who draws or writes for **TTZ** gets any monetary recompense. I love my magazine, and I love that people read it and contribute to it. If all goes well our next edition is our one-year anniversary, slated for 23 November.*

Thank you to Rich for letting us interview him and use so much of his gorgeous artwork. Thanks to Steven for his willingness to write, fabricate, and coax at the drop of a hat. Thank you to Lori for letting me take a photo of her and post it on Facebook.

Let the good times roll!

— **DOCTOR WHO'S BIRTHDAY!**

— EDITOR'S NOTE TO **TERRIBLE ZODIN** #4, AUTUMN 2009

The unofficial heyday of *Doctor Who* fanzines was in the 1980s to early 1990s, both in North America and the UK.¹ Then fanzines went quiet for several decades,² replaced by online message boards and early social media. Then, in 2008, the improbable occurred: a *Doctor Who* fanzine Renaissance, with dozens of new titles popping onto the scene, such as *Fish Fingers and Custard*, *Shooty Dog Thing*, *Blue Box*, *Panic Moon*, *Venusian Spearmint*, *Rassilon's Rod*,³ and *The Terrible Zodin*, my fanzine. Fourteen years later, however, the future of *Doctor Who* fan discussion, I feel certain, will be in podcasts and social media – not fanzines. Fanzines are ephemera in the history of fandom. Was the fanzine Renaissance actually meaningful to *Doctor Who* fans? This chapter will attempt to answer this question through autoethnography and critical analysis.

Choosing autoethnography as a method for this chapter doubtlessly highlights other methodologies in which I could have engaged. Other qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, and quantitative methods, such as analysing the number of downloads of issues of *TTZ*

across time and with regard to demographics, could be extremely useful in answering the question of whether the fanzine Renaissance was actually meaningful to *Doctor Who* fans. Selecting a sample of *TTZ* readers and writers and asking for their comments on how the fanzine affected their engagement with the programme and fandom could be incredibly illustrative. Nevertheless, such methods are far beyond the scope of this chapter (which is not to say they should not be attempted in other contexts!).

Autoethnography is used here to explore how, as a reader of fanzines and as editor of *TTZ*, my feelings, attitudes and beliefs about the fanzine Renaissance and *TTZ* specifically can provide a narrative about this cultural phenomenon. Autoethnography allows for 'ground-level, intimate, and close-up perspectives on experience'.⁴ In this chapter, therefore, I can aspire to an insider perspective whilst also giving a more neutral overview of the history of the engagement of *Doctor Who* fans with fanzines and how this has changed over time.

The medium is the message

Rewind to the Noughties, when the Internet was 'cemented as the hub of fandom',⁵ and the medium of choice for self-expression was the blog, distinguished from other websites by its 'dynamism, reverse chronological presentation and dominant use of the first person'.⁶ Why did attention turn back to the fanzine format around 2008? Fanzines as a participatory medium – something people 'do' together⁷ – have appeared on topics as varied as British football (soccer), science fiction and punk music. Fanzines differ from blogs in that they are interdisciplinary. While a focus is often on writing, fanzines also require 'elementary compositional skills';⁸ therefore juxtaposing graphic design, images and photographs along with the written word. In terms of genre, fanzines could also be much more wide-ranging than the average blog post or indeed what is contained in a mainstream magazine table of contents. For example, physical, cut'n'paste *Doctor Who* fanzines of the 1980s and 1990s included poetry and fan fiction, and *TTZ* has included recipes, paper dolls, spoof family trees and downloadable board games. Running parallel to the spirit of collaboration was the 'do it yourself' ethic of fanzines, reflected in the genesis of *TTZ*, as I started the fanzine in response to my frustration with my article ideas being (politely) rejected by Paul Castle, editor of fanzine *Shooty Dog Thing*. In the fanzine Renaissance, a clear dichotomy was introduced between the print copy zines and the hybrid PDF/print-at-home zines, with the latter lasting far longer than the former. Often beautifully produced and wonderfully physical objects, ranging from the tiny *Panic Moon* to full-size *Rassilon's Rod*, the print zines could be handed around at events or sent through the post. Perhaps this added complication in paying for postage and printing, in addition to a curb on length, predicated their short but exciting tenure.

The fanzine Renaissance corresponds roughly with what is known as forensic fandom, when 'strategies of complexity' began to more regularly characterize TV.⁹ The level of scrutiny of granular detail engendered by forensic fandom encourages 'research collaboration, analysis, and interpretation',¹⁰ which is something fanzines can do well. They arguably can do these things better in the digital age given the speed and ease afforded by the Internet and other digital technologies. *TTZ* arose late in David Tennant's tenure and into Matt Smith's, coinciding with the (narratively complex) era of the programme shown by Steven Moffat, epitomized by fan- and officially created timelines attempting to reconcile River Song's and the Doctor's timelines.¹¹ Fanzines of this period include sometimes lengthy analyses and reflections on New Who and Classic Who. In *TTZ* this is epitomized by our policy of reviewing newly aired stories and long-running series like 'Back2theWhoture', an attempt to watch *Doctor Who* not in story release order but in chronological order (i.e. from the Big Bang to the end of the universe). These

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were combined with an editorial policy of 'family'-friendly fanzine writing and respectful discussion. My attitude towards editorship was to include articles with which I personally might disagree as long as they were clearly and critically written with arguments supporting opinion.

In highlighting the opportunities available to the long-form written article, I do not claim that podcasts, for example, cannot engage in detailed, meticulous and lengthy (!) analyses and fan discussions (see Shetty's chapter 18). While definitively listing podcasts is always difficult, we can be certain, at the moment of writing, that there are more than 100 podcasts about *Doctor Who*¹² from around the world, with the vast majority engaging in fan dissection – in essence, chatcasts/chumcasts.* While longer form writing makes you think critically,¹³ the way in which podcasts and fanzines are consumed generally differs. While there is some evidence that podcasts require close listening and active participation¹⁴ – another form of 'forensic fandom' – there is also evidence that many people listen to podcasts as a secondary medium, while doing something else.¹⁵ It would be difficult to multi-task in the same way while reading a fanzine.

Sexism and social media

Nevertheless, podcasts and fanzines are reasonably similar in that they offer long-form engagement, something that researchers say appeals to younger mobile audiences.¹⁶ Podcasts and fanzines are the antitheses to what may be seen as the frenetic pace of social media discussion on Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, etc. While this feverish pace has its advantages, fast-paced Twitter conversations have been known to spread like wildfire and even dupe world leaders with 'fake news'.¹⁷ 'Toxic fandom'¹⁸ feeds on quick reactions and the prioritization of emotional rather than intellectual responses. As argued by Donaldson with regard to *Doctor Who* fandom, 'Social media websites like Twitter feed on division, they make large amounts of money by dividing groups of people into opposing forces, entrenching them in these sorts of never-ending binary arguments'.¹⁹ This may be a result of the so-called cultishness of fandom, which suggests that fans feel they possess 'sophistication, perseverance and cultural competence' above that of casual viewers,²⁰ thus they 'own' *Doctor Who* and their personal opinions are irrefutably valid.

I cannot speak for other fanzine editors, but this was not the space in which *TTZ* wished to engage with fans. Our policy was to encourage discussion, fellowship, celebration and acceptance, doing our best to refute fan hierarchies. Hadas argues that 'post-television *Doctor Who* was a quintessential cult',²¹ with clear in-groups and everyone else defined as 'Johnny-come-latelies'. We attempted in *TTZ* to reject this attitude, reflected, I believe, in the makeup of our contributors, some of whom had been watching *Doctor Who* since 1963 and demographically represented the stereotypical image of pre-2005 fandom (white, male, British, middle-class), whereas others were relative newcomers, having accessed the series through the 'gateway' of New Who, many of whom were young, female and non-British.

During the fanzine Renaissance, to my knowledge, I was the only female editor of a long-running title.[†] I did not know in 2008 when I started *TTZ* that I was part of an ongoing saga of female-led *Doctor Who*

* At their most basic, chatcasts/chumcasts can be two people talking in front of a microphone in someone's house. They are characterized by their 'chatty, familiar, personal, fluid, intimate' (M. Spinelli and L. Dann, *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 9) quality and account for the vast majority of available podcasts.

† Editor Lea of *Venusian Spearmint* distributed this zine at the Fitzroy Tavern between approximately 2011 and 2013.

Table 40.1 Gender Representation in Televised Doctor Who Creatives Between 1963 and 2021

	1963–2008 (45 years)	2009–2021 (12 years)
Women-directed TV stories	15	16
Women directors	8	7
Percentage of women-directed TV stories out of all TV stories	8%	17%
Women-authored or partially authored TV stories	7	10
Women scriptwriters of the TV series	6	9
Percentage of women-authored or partially authored TV stories out of all TV stories	6%	10%
Percentage of women scriptwriters TV series out of all TV story scriptwriters	5%	9%

fanzines. Female fans of *Doctor Who* have existed as long as the series has been broadcast, yet the series has a legacy of in-programme sexism that was either ignored or is maybe 'too obvious to state'.²² Despite the perception in the 1980s and 1990s that women fans were 'an unusual phenomenon'²³ in British fandom at least, female *Who* fan identities were manifest in fanzines. Sometimes, their gender was unimportant to their self-conception as fans, seeing them adopt a homogenized 'Who-speak'²⁴ like Jackie Jenkins, the pseudonymous female *Who* writer commissioned by Gary Gillatt in *Doctor Who Magazine* from 1997. Sometimes, female-led fanzines manifested gender politically or in a more overtly feminized way.

I arose out of the North American *Doctor Who* experience, which differed in many salient ways from the British one, and although I was too young to be involved in the more gender-mixed fandom of the 1980s and 1990s, *TTZ* mirrored the genre-hopping freewheeling of North American female-edited titles such as *Bafflegab*, *Jelly Baby Chronicles*, *Time Log* and *Rassilon's Star*. At times, New *Who* could present 'a sustained critique of traditional gender dynamics and structures'²⁵ problematized by the post-2005 'schism' between 'anoraks' and 'rabid' female shippers.²⁶ I saw *TTZ* as a space to explore the continuum between these attitudes, rather than cementing their status as mutually exclusive.

The ethos of *TTZ* was a forum for all fans but particularly female ones, predicated partly on the fact that I noticed, from a very young age, that women were underrepresented in major creative roles (writers, directors) in the series.²⁷ In terms of gender representation,[†] we have seen a (modest) shift during the lifetime of *TTZ*. Stories directed by women have doubled.

This has culminated, of course, in the accession of Jodie Whittaker to the role of Thirteenth Doctor. Jowett pointed out in 2014 that it would be essentialist to argue that men cannot write feminist texts, though she also suggested that one reason for the dearth of women writers and directors in the new series was 'because its production is dominated by (male) fan-producers'.²⁸ Sadly, after all the post-2008 advances, there is still much work to do in terms of representation of women directors and writers – it is hardly impressive that only 17 per cent of the stories made between 2009 and 2021 were directed by

[†] Ethnic and racial representation as well as decolonization of the narrative in *Doctor Who* is an equally important subject, one which the series has been shamefully slow to address, and which *TTZ* equally has failed to address until recently.

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women or that only 9 per cent of the writers on *Doctor Who* between 2009 and 2021 were women. And of course, we have yet to have a female *Doctor Who* showrunner. More worryingly, *Doctor Who* fandom’s relationship to gender is *still* fraught. Matthew Jasper rather understated it by noting the ‘exceptionally vitriolic outrage from a loud sect of the fandom, the motivation of which primarily seems to be rooted in their belief that a woman should never play the Doctor’.²⁹

Conclusion

Did the fanzine Renaissance make a difference? It made a difference to me. The act of making my own fanzine brought me into a welcoming social scene so that I could work on something with others interested in the same thing. *TTZ* launched writing careers. I never received any financial recompense for *TTZ* (rather the opposite), which is in keeping with its status as a not-for-profit fan text. Despite this, each issue involved an incredible amount of effort from not only me but the contributors. With the speed and complexity of modern life intensifying, and faced by an increasingly monetized creative media landscape,³⁰ *TTZ* is itself winding down. Podcasts will, for now, inherit the long-form forensic fandom and erudite analysis that characterized the fanzine Renaissance. If there is any wider legacy, then perhaps it is this migration to podcasts where multiplicity of viewpoints and sophisticated discussion are still possible.

Notes

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