

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Now in my last episode, I talked about The Doctor – but there's no Doctor Who without the Doctor's traveling companions. The origin of these companions usually goes something like this. The Doctor arrives in the UK – usually London -- in the year that the show is broadcast. The year is important because he travels through time in his ship, which is called the TARDIS.

While he's here uncovers an alien plot that needs to be foiled. In the meantime, he meets a human who isn't screaming for help. She – and usually it's a she -- helps the Doctor save the world, and he's impressed.

The most ingenious twist on that formula was the introduction of the character Amy Pond, played by Karen Gillan. Matt Smith's Doctor was just regenerated, so he's a little disoriented. He accidentally lands in her backyard when she's a child – which blows her mind. He steps back into the TARDIS for a few minutes, and accidentally returns twelve years later.

You hit me with cricket bat

Twelve years.

A cricket bat!

Twelve years and four psychiatrists. I kept fighting them

Why?

They said you weren't real.

Meanwhile, she helps The Doctor save the world from an alien invasion. And then come the pitch:

So what do you think? Other planets want to check some out?

What does that mean?

It means come with me.

Where?

Wherever you like.

What's so brilliant about this set is the show runner Stephen Moffat took the experience of Doctor Who fans who wished The Doctor was real when they were children, and made it part of her character.

As I was interviewing people for this mini series, I discovered that almost every one had seriously considered at one point in their life what would happen if the Doctor asked them to be his companion on The TARDIS.

FRANK: Absolutely. In my mind as a child that's exactly what I wanted and that's what every child wants to do is when they watch the program is I want to travel with the Doctor.

Frank Collins blogs about Doctor Who in the UK.

FRANK: As an adult, I have my doubts having seen what's happened to various companions over the years.

And he certainly never lets the companions know how dangerous this is going to be

FRANK: Oh no no no. It's only after the fact that he can have oh by the way it could be a bit dangerous. Its kind of it's almost it's almost a bit of a poisoned chalice isn't it really to be a companion because you just don't know what you're going to end up being dead or completely you know a basket case at the end of it all or whatever.

Nick Randell, who works at the BBC agrees. As a kid, he dreamed of going with the Doctor. But now:

NICK: I'm not as young as I was in a very happy settled 10-year relationship. I've got a cat, I got two goldfish, he gets himself into nasty dangerous scrapes, and people die. If I felt he could get me back for tea, and we had an adventure that was scary but not too scary and I knew I was safe.

But some people who jump in the TARDIS in a heartbeat, even as an adult.

ALYSSA: Oh absolutely and I'd 100 percent go with the doctor.

Alyssa Franke blogs on the site Whovian Feminist.

ALYSSA: My only obligation is a cat and I'm pretty sure a cat would fit on the TARDIS just fine, they can roam around and they can be fine.

Emily Asher-Perrin writes for Tor. She and her mother were once watching a companion join the Doctor.

EMILY: And she looked at me and said, would you have done that and I was like you couldn't stop me. I die. You know I would be like as the letter I have no idea when the time machine but he seems like he has no idea what he's doing.

For the record, I would NEVER go with the Doctor, even as a kid. Sure, I would be thrilled if The Doctor turned out to be real. I'd love a tour of the TARDIS. But when it takes off, I would not want to be on it. And I'd still have to spend the next 20 years reassuring my mother, "No, I told you, I never would've stayed on that thing."

In the early days of the show, the writers didn't give the companions character arcs or even backstories. That changed towards the end. In fact, one of the reasons why the fans were so upset that the show as cancelled in 1989 was because the companion finally had a multi-season character arc. Ace – played by Sophie Aldred – she started out as a feisty teenager and Sylvester McCoy's Doctor was like a father figure to her.

CLIP: ACE

By the end of her run, she was going to be time lord in training – or that was the plan if the show hadn't been cancelled.

When Doctor Who came back on the air in 2005, the new show runner Russell T. Davies wanted to ask even more questions about who these people were before they met The Doctor. Why did they leave with him? Why did they stay with him? And can they ever go back to their normal lives?

But there's another question I keep wondering. Are they better off? We're supposed believe yes -- they're all better people because of what they've seen and done. But I'm not sure -- and there are moments when The Doctor doesn't think so either, and swears he'll never take another companion again.

Get ready to board the TARDIS – from the safety of our comfy homes -- just after the break.

> BREAK

A heads up reminder -- this episode will be filled with spoilers because I want to talk about the interesting stuff that happens to these characters and when you travel through space and time, really interesting stuff happens.

The companions are on the show for a very functional reason. They're supposed to be the stand in for the audience. The Doctor is very old, he's seen it all. We need the companion to react as we would.

That's why Rose, played Billie Piper, was my favorite companion. Even if Billie Piper was looking at a green screen and the special effects they fill in later weren't that good, her acting was so genuine, she always sold me on these fantastical worlds.

That's amazing, I'll never get used to this, different ground beneath my feet! Oh, I love this!

I feel the same way about Pearl Mackie. Her character Bill was so genuine in her reactions, and she was funny without being ironic.

What's that? That is a robot! That is not a disappointing robot. Does it speak? Will we understand it?

Depends what aspect of language survived thousands of years.

It speaks emoji!

Of course it does.

Aw! It's cute.

So it's really not a mystery why the companions would go with the Doctor. The first question we need to ask is not why the Doctor even needs companions. The playwright Mac Rogers has wondered that for a long time, not because The Doctor is apathetic towards them. It's actually quite the opposite.

MAC: Whoever the doctor is currently traveling with is the most prioritized person in the universe. And then when they stop someone else becomes the most prioritized person in years. That is what's bad is an emotionally bizarre way to behave. Everything is fixated on the current traveling companion the others. Sometimes you run across them later on in certain circumstances and is always very fond of them always very pleased to see them again. But he isn't thinking

night and day about how to save them from peril or whatever. It helps a lot that he is an alien helps immensely that he's an alien.

Sarita Robinson has a theory about this. She teaches psychology at the University of Central Lancashire. As part of the 50th anniversary celebration 2013, the university asked if she'd be interested in drafting psychological profiles of The Doctor and his companions.

SARTIA: And I just went, hold my coat! I've been waiting for the last -- all my life really to be asked to do this.

She came to the conclusion that the Doctor is attracted to companions who remind him of himself. They're restless and dissatisfied with the mundanity of daily life. They crave adventure, and the rush of adrenaline. They're also very curious about the universe, and very clever in a crisis.

SARITA: On the flip side the doctor does takes some companions who aren't academically bright in the sort of traditional sense and I think it's quite important to realize there are different types of intelligence. So sometimes the doctor selects on emotional intelligence so that's the ability to sort of recognize emotions in other people and act empathetically.

She thinks that may be the key ingredient the companions have that Doctor sometimes lacks – empathy. That's why he needs them around.

Take the 2008 episode, The Fires of Pompeii. David Tennant's Tenth Doctor wants to show his new companion, Donna, the wonders of ancient Rome but they find themselves on the eve of Pompeii's eruption. He doesn't try to save the people of Pompeii because they're supposed to die. Donna begs him to change his mind.

CLIP: FIRES OF POMPEII

He does. But strangely enough, the family that The Doctor saves is lead by Peter Capaldi – the very actor who would later be cast as the twelfth Doctor. The way they justified this was by giving Capaldi a flashback to that Pompeii episode, so explain why he subconsciously picked that face.

CLIP: I KNOW WHY I PICKED THIS FACE

And there's another reason why The Doctor prefers traveling with human companions. They remind him of the limitations he doesn't have.

SARITA: He sort of says that he likes his characters its companions to be like mayflies because if they are like mayflies then they sort of remind him of the importance of life. So he doesn't like his characters to be immortal so I'm on a winner there. I think Ill be all right with that.

Clip: The mayflies know more than we do, they know how beautiful life is because it's fleeting.

And the companions are reminded how fleeting and precious life can be because they're almost killed in every episode.

SARITA: Yeah, I think there's certainly post-traumatic growth that goes on as I would say they have their reality shook up they may witness things that are traumatic at the time but they are framed in such a way that you can see the Doctor helping to frame the experiences that they've had to the point where they're seen as positive.

But there's a negative way of looking at their role on the TARDIS. And this critique actually came from one of the villains on the show, an alien called Davros. In the 2008 episode Journey's End, David Tennant's Doctor has gathered all of his companions to stop Davros' evil plan. But Davros points out the Doctor has militarized his companions to the point where they are willing to die to carry out The Doctor's plans.

Clip: The man who abhors violence, never carrying gun but this is the truth, you take ordinary people and fashion them to weapons, i have seen them sacrifice them today for their beloved doctor.

The Doctor winces because he knows it's true.

In real life, Doctor Who has been subject to another serious critique. As I mentioned, most of the companions have been women. Most of the writers have been white men. That's been a problem – especially in the modern series.

A lot of fans felt the show did a poor job handling the racial aspects of The Doctor's first black companion, Martha Jones. There was also widespread

criticism that the show runner Stephen Moffat treated female characters as either plot devices or mysteries for the Doctor to solve. And on top of that - the companions couldn't stop swooning over The Doctor.

There was also widespread criticism that the show runner Stephen Moffat treated female characters as plot devices. For instance, The Doctor sometimes traveled with a woman named River Song, who turned out to be his time traveling wife from the future. But a lot of fans complained that she was treated like a puzzle for The Doctor to solve. And the female characters couldn't stop swooning over him.

MONTAGE: MARTHA, AMY, CLARA, RIVER

Alyssa Franke actually started her blog, Whovian Feminism, because she felt the companions weren't getting the respect they deserved.

ALYSSA: It was one period of time where there was a number of things happening that I personally found problematic which isn't to say that's my view of the entire show. I think there's been a lot of very great moments for women on Doctor Who where they have been fantastic and funny and interesting characters.

Her favorite companion actually hails from the early '70s -- Jo Grant, who was played by Katie Manning. This is back when the third Doctor, played by John Pertwee, was working with a government agency called UNIT that fought aliens on Earth. Jo was assigned to be The Doctor's assistant, but it was a tough learning curve.

Three months delicate work you ham fistid bun vender.

But this whole place may have gone up in flames.

My dear young lady, steady state micro welding always creates more smoke that fire!

Steady stake micro welding?

Yes.

ALYSSA: So I started watching Jo Grant when I had just graduated from college and was entering my first post college job and it was a sort of scary nerve-wracking time for me. I was doing a lot of things that I had never done professionally before. I was very nervous about whether or not I was actually good at anything that I was doing. So I was pretty you know at a low place. I

didn't have a lot of morale at the moment. And Jo Grant starts off her adventures with the doctor really in sort of the exact same place. She's a very young woman at the time that she gets partnered with the doctor. She's basically got the job because of family connections and nobody really believes that she's good or qualified for it. She grows from there and she's a woman by the end of her time traveling with the doctor that knows him is in control of her own mind who's force to be reckoned with.

Look! That's it! The thing I saw! Don't shoot! Look!

Even Nick Randell, as a young boy, found Jo Grant inspiring.

NICK: She could get very scared like I would when an alien would come but she would be brave as well. So I'll be hiding behind the sofa terrified as she was but I was getting inspired rush. She was standing up for herself as well. So all great stuff for life skills I think.

Many of companions go through that arc. They get to be very brave. They save the day when the Doctor can't. In the best companion storylines, there's a moment where the companion gets to be the most important person in the universe. That's really satisfying if the companion is from a working class background, or she's working with a pompous man like Jo Grant did with the Third Doctor.

But there's a downside. By the end, the companions are almost like war veterans. They have this incredibly intense, high adrenaline experience when they're young – but they have the rest of their lives to lead back on Earth.

And because the show has been around so long, we can see how this plays out in real time.

Take Sarah Jane Smith, who played by Elisabeth Sladen. She came on the show right after Jo Grant – but Sarah Jane was this headstrong journalist who worked with the Third Doctor and Tom Baker's Fourth Doctor.

CLIP

Mac Rogers says he will never forget her final scene with Tom Baker in 1976. Their separation was supposed to be temporary, but The Doctor knew he wasn't coming back for her.

MAC: And the way that that's played between the two of them is beautiful. Tom Baker Elizabeth Sladen chemistry is extraordinary. And it's a low key thing, they didn't do a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth in the old show.

CLIP: DON'T FORGET ABOUT ME

Sarah Jane was the first companion from the classic series to return in the modern series. So she got her chance to confront The Doctor thirty years later, when he was played by David Tennant.

CLIP: DID I DO SOMETHING WRONG?

After she appeared on that episode of Doctor Who, Elisabeth Sladen got her own spin-off series, The Sarah Jane Adventures. Her character adopted a boy and they fought aliens on Earth with the help of a super computer. The show was for a young audience. It was a hit, but cut short for tragic reasons. Elisabeth Sladen developed cancer and she died in 2011.

Again, Mac Rogers:

MAC: I remember when she passed away like my whole Twitter feed I follow tons of like you know doctors who were fans you know they were just flattened. They were just like late middle age grown men telling each other they loved them because they were because they were so they were so devastated because it felt like it felt like losing your buddy was like how could how could we ever lose Sarah Jane?

Sarah Jane Smith shares something in common with the companions. When you travel in the Doctor, something is gained, and something is lost. When Sarah Jane sees The Doctor again after 30 years, she admits that she found a romantic partner because no relationship could ever compare to what she had The Doctor, even though their relationship was never romantic. And she had one of the more upbeat endings.

Some companions end up trapped in the past, or trapped in a parallel universe. They can never return home again, or see The Doctor. And some

of them by the end of their travels aren't even human anymore, or technically alive.

But the most controversial fate for any companion had to be Donna Noble, played by Catherine Tate.

A lot of the people I spoke with said Donna was their favorite companion. She was brassy, funny, and did NOT have a crush on The Doctor.

CLIP: JUST WANT A MATE

EMILY: Donna is so many, so many people but explicitly so many women that know.

Emily Asher-Perrin writes for the website Tor.

EMILY: The idea of sort of ranting at the universe because you don't think anyone's listening like this sort of feeling that you have to be overbearing and very sort of loud and in people's faces because you don't think that anyone has any interest in what you are what you're saying at all. I think it's something that most women can relate to and I think that Donna embodies that incredibly well along with being you know exceptionally funny and bright in her own way which I think is a really sort of beautiful thing to see. And also very happily not quite as young as the rest of the companions which I think as a woman when you know that the majority of the roles that women get in any story are usually going to be geared a little bit younger. It's really sort of aspirational to see someone a known Don is not even that old but if you know someone who is over the age of 30 still stopping on the TARDIS and saying yes I want to do this. This sounds like fun.

When we first meet Donna, she's a fairly shallow character. She gets ginned up over petty grievances at work. She wants to be married for the sake of it.

This man you're marrying, what's his name?

Lance

Good luck, Lance.

Oy! No stupid Martian is going to stop me from getting married. To hell with you! I'm not, I'm not from Mars.

Donna grows tremendously in her travels. At the end of her run, she saves the universe by absorbing the energy of The TARDIS, and taking on The Doctor's mental powers. But her human mind isn't built for that kind of knowledge. To spare her life, the Doctor has to erase all of her memories of traveling with him. She begs him not to. She'd rather die with this incredible knowledge than go back to who she was before.

I want to stay

I was going to be with you forever

I know

Rest of my life traveling in the TARDIS.

The Doctor wipes her memory, and all of the character development we saw her go through is wiped out as well. But Donna gets married. She even wins the lottery, thanks to The Doctor. This would've been a dream come true for the Donna we met at the beginning. She is clearly very happy with the way her life turned out, and doesn't know what was taken from her. But everyone I spoke with felt that Donna had the worst fate of any companion.

Like here's Riley Silverman.

RILEY: I'm still to this day heartbroken about what happened to her at the end. I think it's this I think it's the worst thing I've done to a companion on that show and I've seen companions die multiple times on the classic Doctor Who. She really saw how much more there was to the universe which is kind of the whole point of Doctor Who like the whole point of the show is come with me and I'll show you how wonderful the universe is. And Donna is the character who was basically deny that wonder. So I think that's why as fans of the show we find it so hard because. But that's all we want. We want to be Donna. We don't want to be put back into our lives.

Whenever the companions go home, and realize they can't relate to anyone after what they've seen and done, I'm always reminded of this essay that Salman Rushdie wrote about The Wizard of Oz.

He talked about how the movie and the book have different lessons. The movie tells us there's no place like home but in the books, Dorothy can't go to her old life in Kansas – not after she's seen Oz. And Rushdie argued that we all have our own personal Kansas and our own personal Oz in our lives.

Leaving home can be bittersweet, but it's a necessary part of growing up. And since Doctor Who has always appealed to children, I think that's why the companions always go through that arc.

In my last episode, I talked about Doctor's regenerations could be seen as a metaphor for how we can become better people.

But I think the companions tell a slightly different story about change. Evolution is important, it's necessary, but evolution always comes at a cost. Something is gained and something is lost. But if what you gain is knowledge, then the journey is worth it.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Sarita Robinson, Emily Asher Perrin, Alyssa Franke, Frank Collins, Kelsey Jefferson Barrett, Nick Randall, Mac Rogers, and Stephanie Billman.

Next time on Imaginary Worlds Doctor Who -- why the scariest thing in the universe a giant armored saltshaker with a sink plunger sticking out of it?

MONTAGE PREVIEW

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