

The Monthly Telepress

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SELLING THE ANCESTOR

Peter Anghelides talks about writing this eagerly-awaited novel.

"Would you like to write an Eighth Doctor book with me?" Steve Cole asked me. I studied him warily. "There's a pint in it for you," he added quickly. I replied: "How can I say no?"

Steve was previously the range consultant for the *Doctor Who* books. Before *The Ancestor Cell* was commissioned, Steve had already left the BBC and published another co-authored *Who* novel, *Parallel 59*. I had provided comments on *Parallel 59* at outline stage, and also done the structural edit for the BBC.

I therefore knew Steve was someone I enjoyed working with. And Steve chose me because I was alphabetically first in his contacts book, David Agnew being suddenly unavailable. The "Eighth Doctor Authors" internet mailing list had avidly discussed where the stories and characters should go. And being the range consultant, Steve had been thinking for some time about the future of the books, of course.

Meanwhile, new *Who* consultant Justin Richards had his own clear ideas about how he saw the Eighth Doctor and the Past Doctor books developing. He wrote a discussion document, establishing what *could* be central the series. From that, he identified what he actually wanted to concentrate on, what was in and what was out. And, unlike some BBC producers when they came in to the TV series, he didn't want to simply move on immediately and ignore the past, so he had a number of things he thought should be resolved.

As to the way the books would develop after *The Ancestor Cell*... Well, the risk of doing just the "BBC producer" thing is that you end up sinking Atlantis on a regular basis. The risk of doing just the "fan continuity" thing is that you can't pick up your pen and write because your arms are weighed down by heavy bags filled with decades of continuity. The new direction of the books avoids the pitfalls of either approach, and Justin's discussed it with lots of the writers—and posted some of it here in *Telepress*, of course.

So Steve and I brainstormed the contents of a novel via e-mail, then pitched it to Justin and BBC Worldwide's Ben Dunn. They had some further suggestions, which we haggled over, and we were then commissioned to write the book. It started off life, unimaginatively, as "July 2000 Novel", became "Enemy Mine!" in mock tribute to the TV movie, and was briefly lumbered with "The Horrid Obsession of Greyjan the Sane" until Steve came to the rescue with "The Ancestor Cell".

The novel has not end up as a collection of in-references and dense continuity, because Steve and I agreed right at the beginning to write a compelling story which would grip even the most casual readers, and not to pedantically tie every supposed loose end. We both feel that distracting and irrelevant continuity cross-references are just "fanky-panky".

Some people have speculated that the book will "reset" the DW universe, stepping back to the past; others than it will "resolve" all the open questions, stepping forward into the future. Sometimes it does one or other of these. Occasionally, though, we decided it should step sideways—lateral thinking, if you like, a classic Doctor routine.

Loyal readers who have read all the books will get the bonus of recognising more than the casual reader, of course. You don't need to know everything about Compassion and Fitz's background, about Faction Paradox's tangling with the Doctor's timeline, about Gallifrey's impending and terrible war with an unknown Enemy. We want all readers to appreciate the characters, events, and motivations beyond the continuity references—to see the wood for the trees (though continuity buffs should recognise the forest).

When Lawrence Miles introduced Compassion to the series, with the idea that she develop into a TARDIS, the "Eighth Doctor Authors" mailing list discussed a proposed series of books which eventually ran from *Interference* to *Shadows of Avalon*. My novel, *Frontier Worlds*, eventually sat somewhere in the middle.

At the time, I didn't think I would be able to write one of the books, because (before reading *Interference*) I thought that the character outline revealed Compassion to be an emotionless, amoral robot whose selfish pursuit of continued existence along the path of least resistance suggested a total abnegation of herself – in short, not very dramatic. Obviously.

Then I "got" her, thanks in no small part to the discussion on the mailing list, and Steve's polite (if slightly pained) defence of Lawrence's creation. Compassion seemed rude because she just didn't care enough about other people to be polite. She was self-interested out of a sense of practicality that verged on the amoral. She was superior, because... well... most of the time, she was superior to most of the people around her. I recognised some character traits that sparked conflict and drama, putting her both alongside and at odds with Fitz and the Doctor.

So I enjoyed making her a central part of *Frontier Worlds*, and it's been a delight to work with Steve on *The Ancestor Cell* where Compassion faces the most difficult challenge of her surprisingly long life.

More important for me and Steve, *The Ancestor Cell* is a turning point in the BBC Books. As such, it's rooted in the book series, more than the TV series. My *Dark Secret*, by the way, is that haven't read all the published DW books, and so I used *I, Who*, Lars Pearson's excellent unauthorized guide, to get up to speed on bits I thought should be useful. Like any background research for writing, it's more important to understand what's happened than to explain everything in detailed references in the finished book.

I'm sure readers looking hard enough will find allusions to *Alien Bodies*, *Unnatural History*, *Frontier Worlds*, *The Taking of Planet 5*, *Parallel 59*... and, of course, *Interference*. But the book doesn't exclude *The Infinity Doctors* or some of the Virgin New Adventures like *Damaged Goods* and *The Pit* from its thinking.

Before you keel over in horror at this apparent excess of "fanky-panky", be reassured that the story always comes first. Besides which, we wanted to add our own original spin to the book series, and to Gallifrey.

Early on in our brainstorming, Steve memorably described the way the TV Gallifrey had descended into "two corridors of corrugated cardboard meeting at a one-tap fountain". So we got the builders in, obviously. Did a bit of redevelopment, architecturally and conceptually. Doubtless some readers will feel we brought in the bulldozers, but that's too bad—one guy's art deco is another guy's flock wallpaper.

What's more, we know from *The Taking of Planet 5* and *Shadows of Avalon* that Gallifrey is girding itself for the coming War (capital W), and have some dreadful plans for Compassion. So when an ominous death-white monstrosity manifests itself over Gallifrey, things are looking grim.

Since we know from *Interference* that Faction Paradox fashion huge ships from bone, I imagined

this edifice to be a skeletal combination of the Needle from “The Infinity Doctors” and the huge alien ships from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or *Independence Day*. Is it there for good or evil? Steve mentioned the giant-shape-in-the-sky story that Philip Hinchcliffe mooted in the Graham Williams fourth Doctor era. And there’s that huge Faction artefact that houses Anathema on its three billion year stealth mission in *Interference*, of course.

In the end, I think we came up with another spin on these familiar concepts—introducing completely new elements, as well as looking askance at some of the received images of the series. It’s like when you spot new things in a familiar old photo because you’re holding it up to a mirror and seeing it from a different perspective.

For fresh insights on the finished book, we deliberately confined our read-through team to people who were *not* on the “Eighth Doctor Authors” list. The one exception was Lance Parkin, who perused the submission draft. Lance has the ability to offer constructive insights on plot and continuity, because he long ago sated his strange passion for pedantic DW continuity with his exhaustive (and exhausting) *History of the Universe* book. He provided us with a rounded view of the final draft’s strengths and weaknesses.

I think the best ideas are informed by a broader spectrum of reference, anyway—witting or unwitting. For example, Faction fans will recall the Third Doctor denouement of *Interference* on a distant planet. But how many remember the Editor in H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* asking himself:

“What was this time travelling? A man couldn’t cover himself with dust by rolling in a paradox, could he?”

And the “grandfather paradox” is a classic time travel concept going back to C. South’s “The Time Mirror” in 1942.

As to knotting all those loose ends...? Well, I would prefer people to see each book as a “stepping on” rather than a “getting off” point. Doctor Who is constantly developing, so I’m not sure I’d want to tidy everything up. Even shows like “Genesis of the Daleks”, which purport to provide answers and closure, actually open things up *more* because fans love to speculate.

No doubt people will spot more frayed bits hanging out of *The Ancestor Cell*. At least we haven’t sunk Atlantis again. Obviously.