

The writing of *Kursaal*

An earlier version of this article appeared in January 2001 on the *Jade Pagoda* online discussion group. I happened to mention on that discussion group that I wrote *Kursaal* in two weeks. Rather than saying “yeah, and it shows”, people said, “How is that possible?”

The truth is a little more prosaic. Writing the text took two weeks. But from my first contact with the BBC to the books publication was 18 months. I’m not sure whether two weeks is necessarily good or bad. I’m sure it would be possible to spend seventeen years writing a perfectly dreadful novel. So this article discusses how my first novel came to be published.

I realise that this trainspotterish detail may seem rather self-possessed of me (for which read “vain” 😊). But I enjoy all kinds of writing, even the couple of thousand words in explanations or articles like this one. In addition, I was invited (a while back) to discuss my writing methods with a UK writing group, some of whose members have written for other franchises like Mills & Boon; so I have some of this information in my files and can regurgitate it here for people who might find it interesting—or maybe even useful in their own approach to writing a first novel. It worked OK for me, so... er... take it or leave it!

Contact has been made

June 1996

Getting a break in publishing can be a matter of luck. Or maybe that’s just spotting an opportunity and making the most of it. Several of my friends had already written *Doctor Who* novels for Virgin Publishing, and they were therefore in the group of writers who the BBC first approached when BBC Worldwide took over the novels from Virgin. When I learned this, I got the names of the two commissioning editors at BBC Worldwide (Rona Selby and Nuala Buffini) and e-mailed them on 4 June to say I would like to pitch them an idea.

I followed this up with a phone call with Nuala to discuss what they were looking for. At the time, they were planning to capitalize on the TV Movie, which had been broadcast only the previous month. They were considering more “traditional” and perhaps even “historical” novels. And, of course, they were interested to know whether I could write, rather than just talk about writing. As I remember, all Nuala’s notes to me were written on *Doctor Who* movie postcards.

Nuala also sent me the BBC’s *Doctor Who: Guidelines for Prospective Authors* document. This was shorter, less pedantic, and more direct than the “how to write” guidelines sent out by Virgin for their *New Adventures* series. These Guidelines said, among other things:

- a. Books would be 75,000-80,000 words
- b. No unsolicited manuscripts would be considered until after 9 September
- c. Synopses should be no longer than 4,00 words and a sample chapter of the same length

I wanna sell you a story

August 1996

Over several evenings, I wrote a proposal for a novel called “*Kursaal*”, dated 19 August. This was 3,800 words long—within the word-limit specified by the Guidelines, though it is rather longer than I’d recommend now for BBC submissions—bear in mind there were fewer proposals for the BBC to consider in the early days of the BBC novels, as the first commissions were based on requests to specific authors. You’ll also see that the new companion, Sam Jones, does not appear in the proposal at all. Nuala hadn’t mentioned Sam, and I had therefore pitched an idea for a story that (like the TV Movie) had a one-off companion.

I definitely wanted to write for the Eighth Doctor, rather than for a “past” Doctor, but I helpfully explained in the synopsis how it could be adapted for a variety of Doctor-plus-one-companion combinations. Nuala confirmed that she received this on... 9 September!

Very interesting, but...

September/October 1996

In late September, Nuala wrote back to say she was interested in the proposal, but had three things to consider before making a decision. The first was that she wasn't sure that the 15-year break in the middle worked, and would I consider revising it so that the events happened in the same time zone but different places on the planet. The second was that she wanted to get the opinion of her as-yet-unnamed editorial guy, to whom she was handing over the commissioning. The third was that she'd like to see an example of my writing. So I sent her a copy of “Moving On”, my short story in *Decalog* 3, as my “sample chapter” (what a swizz, eh?) and told her I'd just received a contract from Virgin Publishing to do something else for them.

Although I knew Nuala was handing over the day-to-day running of the *Who* stuff to someone else, I still wrote back to her in the first week of October (the day I received her letter). And I made some suggestions about how I could address her concerns about the outline with appropriate revisions.

Keeping up with Sam Jones

February 1997

I heard from the new guy, a chap called Stephen Cole, that the BBC was still interested in “Kursaal”. (Incidentally, he had already selected a book called *Alien Bodies* at this stage, which was the first of the Eighth Doctor novels that he commissioned.) He wasn't so concerned about the 15-year gap (it's a time travel series, right?), but he did have this new companion called Samantha Jones, devised by Terrance Dicks. I would need to incorporate Sam and, unlike Amy in my proposal, she could not be killed off.

As it happened, I think I knew a bit about Sam Jones because there was some discussion on the *rec.arts.drwho* internet newsgroup where, among others, *Vampire Science* authors Jon Blum and Kate Orman were discussing how good (or otherwise) the character was.

Revising the outline

March/April 1997

Steve Cole sent me the character outline, and I worked on a couple of revised drafts of the proposal. I decided I could introduce a new companion (regardless of who she was) and still feature Amy in some way.

11 March: I submitted draft 3, incorporating Sam Jones.

18 March: Steve e-mailed me, saying he thought Sam fitted in well, but there were a few other things to discuss. For example, there are two very similar shuttle chases, and Sam's motivation in escaping with Amy was not clear enough. Looking back at it now, I can see how much stuff Steve must have been working on at the time with two lines of books plus other tie-in merchandise (his e-mail to me was at 11:29 p.m.).

19 March: Phone call with Steve to discuss and agree the fixes. This is the point at which I decided that Sam would take on responsibility for Amy's death, and make clearer the tension between her loyalty to the eco-terrorists and her loyalty to the Doctor. Steve decided to commission the book (must have been my polished telephone manner).

21 March: Steve writes to me and commissions “Kursaal”, now with an upper word limit of 85,000 words, and manuscript delivery date of 31 August.

4 April: I submitted a revised outline containing the amendments.

13 April: I fleshed out the outline into a 13,000-word scene-by-scene breakdown, and then looked for good points at which to put chapter breaks. For each scene I provided the location, whose point of view (POV), and what time of day. This was to help me be consistent, and to see whether the story could be conveyed credibly and comprehensibly. It’s one thing to say “an ecological pressure group has run a Greenpeace-style direct action campaign against Gray Corp, and successfully disrupted work all over the planet so that the project is running well behind”, but how do you demonstrate that plausibly in action and characterisation? I also find it distracting when point of view changes in a scene. In the outline, I scribbled ideas for bits of business, snatches of dialogue, character and location notes, etc.

At this point, of course, work and family commitments got took priority, so I didn’t write anything else for the rest of the month. Besides, where was that contract, eh? 😊 So at the end of the month, I went on vacation.

A holiday from the Doctor

May 1997

Mind you, I discovered that by being on holiday at Center Parcs in Windsor (near to Longleat House and its *Doctor Who* Exhibition, by complete coincidence) I would miss the chance to attend the BBC Books launch party. I persuaded my wife that I could have a half-day-holiday from my holiday, and traveled to London for one evening. How could I miss this opportunity, they’d sent me a free ticket!

There is, of course, no such thing as a free launch. The BBC had put it on in West London, and I went along and met some of the other authors. This included one (I forget who, it may have been Jim Mortimore) who asked me if I’d written “that K-9 story in *Decalog 3*” and when I said “yes” he said “You really must write a novel!” (I said I’d do my best).

I’d already bumped into David Howe at the tube station on my way in, and he asked me if I agreed with his thoughts about the cover. I said I hadn’t seen it yet, and hadn’t even started writing the book! I think that the launch party was also the first time that Justin Richards heard that *Option Lock* had been commissioned. Attendees got some snazzy t-shirts, a postcard book, and copies of the first four books—two Past Doctor Adventures and the first two Eighth Doctor Adventures. This meant that, counting Lance Parkin’s splendid Virgin finale *The Dying Days*, I had three Eighth Doctor novels to read when and if I had time.

The launch party also handed out copies of the TV Movie postcard book, which was helpful when it came to reference material for what Paul McGann’s Doctor looked like.

Cover version

May/June 1997

Following the launch party, I wrote to the Beeb asking to see the cover for *Kursaal*, so that I could incorporate (or at least not contradict) the illustration. I had originally conceived the Jax wolves like the dog-headed mobsters in the Bruce Willis action film *The Fifth Element*, but with longer snout, coarse hair, and no clothes—altogether more “wolf-like”, albeit with opposable thumbs. I hadn’t seen the film at that stage, so it was a happy coincidence that there were photos in the *i* that I thought would be useful reference.

However, when I saw the “Kursaal” cover, it featured a traditional wolf-like head. (It also features Earth’s moon, of course, but I chose to conveniently ignore this fact.) I decided to abandon my plans for the appearance of the Jax wolves, and go for more “traditional” werewolf transformations. This posed a small problem: the Jax needed to have manipulation skills, since they were obviously capable of building a palace. From this I extrapolated to having them be humanoid at some stage in their evolution, and from this to the theory about dominant species, and then on to what I felt was the much better narrative twist of making the Jax a virus (after doing a lot of research into various types and behaviours of retroviruses).

The lazy answer, I suppose, would have been to leave the story as it was and ignore the cover, or say it was just “symbolic”. As it is, I think the revisions it prompted made the novel better. I’ve tried not to think too much about quite what I’d have done if cover designers Black Sheep had featured Lon Chaney Jr. instead.

Throughout the month, I also discussed my contract with BBC Business Affairs via mail, fax and e-mail. There were some changes I wanted made, based on what I’d seen as standard elements in the Virgin contracts that I had previously signed for *Decalog 3* and *Decalog 4*. Ordinarily, one wouldn’t expect to quibble too much about a first novel... but I had some prior examples, and the other writers (with whom I was now corresponding via e-mail) were good for comparing notes with. I also discussed some Sam characterization with the other authors, including (for example) how she would react to finding death and the dead around her. And I exchanged e-mail with Paul Leonard, while I considered how (if at all) to use a continuity reference to the Tractites and to Time Trees from *Genocide*.

It would not be until early the following month, June 2nd, that the first two books in the new BBC *Doctor Who* range were officially published: *The Eight Doctors* by Terrance Dicks and *The Devil Goblins* from Neptune by Keith Topping and Martin Day.

The story so far

June 1997

OK, so this is the point I’d reached before the “two week” writing that I mentioned at the top of this article. You’ll gather, therefore, that a lot of planning and thinking had already gone into the novel by this stage. I have a full-time job, so a lot of the prep work was done over evenings and at weekends when I had neither work nor family commitments. To do the prose writing, however, I decided to dedicate a whole working week to writing as much as I could. So I booked a week’s vacation, during which my wife and children went to visit the grandparents and left me at home.

Other people will have different personal circumstances or preferences for writing (to a soundtrack, for example—I rarely write with music playing, but that’s more because I don’t want to wake the children up in the evening).

Unlike my later novels, I wrote *Kursaal* in story order, and so I’d reached the end of scene 30 (end of Chapter 8) by the end of this first writing period. (You can see Chapter 3 online at <http://anghelides.org>)

The method that worked for me was to create Chapter files in Lotus WordPro (my editor of choice) into which I’d copied-and-pasted the appropriate part of the scene breakdown (see above). Then I typed over and around that text as I drafted the chapter.

Sometimes, as I wrote, I’d go off at a tangent, and have to throw stuff away (or come back from the tangent and throw away what I’d written!) At other times, I’d have to devise new stuff in order for the narrative to make sense. For example, it’s one thing to write in an outline “Sam isn’t impressed”, but you need to see her actions, learn her feelings, or hear her dialogue to get this. So she says things like ‘What is this, the off-season?’ Later I can go back and add stuff like ‘I

hope you booked a return flight' which will (I hope) echo what happens in the second half of the book when they come back to *Kursaal* after a 15-year gap—a different kind of return ticket.

In six days I wrote the first 40,000 words, and then the family came back home. We decided that this had been quite a productive way of working, and so I booked another week off work a month later when (a) work and family commitments allowed and (b) I could allow contingency time for under-running, rewrites, etc.

Incidentally, I formally signed the contract to write the novel on 23 June, at which point I received the first half of my advance on royalties.

Authorial intentions

July 1997

I wrote the rest of the novel in that subsequent seven-day holiday in July. After that, I would spend a variety of evenings and weekend time revising the draft before submitting it in August.

I also exchanged a lot of e-mail with the other *Who* authors. Jon Blum had set up a mailing list and a "secret" web site, where we exchanged discussions about the regular characters, the plots of our novels, etc. Through these e-mails I made it clear, I hoped, that I wasn't as unhappy as a few of the others were with Terrance Dicks' character sketch for Sam Jones. I thought she was interesting because of her flaws—for example, how she behaved rather young for her age, and her instinctive rather than rational opinions, etc.

The documents that came out of this over the next year on the web site (but which were not all available at this point) were:

- a. The BBC Books Guidelines with our thoughts about them
- b. General thoughts about the Eighth Doctor, including: what Jon Blum remembered Philip Segal telling him at the Visions convention; McGann's thoughts from the Bidding Adieu video; McGannisms ("performance" notes from observing the actor in various film and TV roles); his "darker" side.
- c. Sam Jones: original outline and suggested revisions; backstory and development (reams of stuff here, with no consensus); her crush on the Doctor and how it would develop and resolve; what-would-she-do-if? scenarios; self discipline vs. puritanism.
- d. The TARDIS layout (less interesting to me, I wasn't going to have any TARDIS scenes).
- e. Continuity (high-level stuff).
- f. Useful stuff that fans were saying on newsgroups (and whether we agreed or disagreed or cared).

The active members of this discussion group were: Jon Blum, Kate Orman, me, Justin Richards, Steve Cole, Paul Cornell, Lance Parkin, Mike Collier, Paul Leonard and John Peel. We got stuff out to writers who didn't have e-mail access (such as Mark Morris and Lawrence Miles), but only Mark responded. To give you some idea how far ahead the series was being commissioned, the writers were now discussing how Sam's character might evolve in what was to become Jon Blum and Kate Orman's book for the following year, *Seeing I*.

The long and the short of it

August 1997

Work and home life became more important at this stage, so for the next few weeks I did read-throughs of the draft. I also passed it on to my read-through team (friends and novelists Justin Richards and Craig Hinton; work colleague and fantasy writer John Barfield; wife and writer Anne Summerfield). In the second half of August, I produced a revised second draft using my notes and their comments (where I agreed with them).

On a couple of occasions, I think spoke with Steve Cole's editorial assistant Lesley Levine (no relation to Virgin Publishing's Rebecca), who I would talk to on the phone when Steve was either too busy to talk or was making some feeble excuse to hide from me.

He did send all the writers an e-mail containing a photo of "Sam" so that writers could have a consistent image of her. This was rather less helpful to me, as I'd based her on what I'd gleaned from earlier books plus a photo I'd clipped out of *Radio Times* and stuck on the pin board above my computer (next to the Paul McGann postcards, a copy of an encyclopedia line-art of a cathedral, and a photo of a wolf).

Other things I'd hunted out as research at this point included: information about World Heritage Sites; structure and function of enzymes; viruses, retroviruses, viral factors in neoplasms; the physiology of somatic death (cheerful bed-time reading); canids (dogs, wolves, foxes); landmarks and characteristics of the moon. I had also written my own "cribsheet" for the Doctor and Sam's characters, so that I could be consistent while I wrote and rewrote their scenes.

I was aware that my submission draft was 89,000 words long—four thousand more than contracted. I asked Steve beforehand whether he wanted me to cut it before submitting, or whether he'd be happy to see the long version with my suggestions about where to cut it. He agreed to see the long version for the structural (desk) edit. I also proposed chopping a number of sections, particularly a couple of thousand words of Chapter 1 alone—which was fun but was holding up the plot. I negotiated a couple of extra days for the manuscript submission deadline, printed the whole thing out twice on my incredibly slow HP inkjet printer, and posted draft 3 to the BBC. It was 88,000 words.

Some time around this point, I also signed a number of "Ex Libris BBC Books" stickers, which were supposed to go into freebie copies or competition prize copies of the printed book. I wonder if anyone ever received one of these?

Bad language, no butts

September 1997

All my correspondence with editor Steve Cole was cordial and well mannered, with never a bad word between us. Unfortunately, this was not true for some of my characters.

On 10 September, Steve e-mailed me his editorial comments. One thing that the early BBC Books were cautious about was swearing, and several of my characters swore—not dreadfully, but noticeably. I could understand this caution as the BBC tried to establish the line at a time when there was still a possibility of a second film or a TV series: it would not do to have *Daily Mail* headlines using the *Doctor Who* franchise as a stick with which to beat the Corporation because of a "shit" quoted out of context. Oddly, some things sneaked through: Sam says "Gordon Christ!" for example (a line quoted from the daughter of a work colleague), which sets up the Doctor's line at the cliffhanger conclusion to the same chapter. But all the "shits" came out, as it were. I decided to make a virtue of this by having Cockaigne, deliberately an irritating character, be more irritating because of his penchant for the word "poo". Steve and I also had a somewhat surreal exchange of e-mail about Kadijk's imperious steak order to a hapless waiter: "Whack off its horns, wipe its arse, and stick it on a plate." Apparently, "arse" was not allowed. Steve suggested "bottom". I said that this spoiled the euphony of the line, and to his credit Steve did not retort "you phoney", but agreed on "butt" instead.

Other things changed at this stage included: Sam's unexpected familiarity with specific brands of cigarettes; a *Basil Brush* gag from 1975; clarification about Kadijk's "I-card"; toning down Sam's wardrobe; plus some toning down of the horror sequence where Bandros is found slaughtered. Best of all, the novel was now to start on a strong image ("pulled teeth"), with Amy Saraband

entering the underground cathedral just as the reader enters the book. We decided that, contrary to one of my asides, Sam would not know who Captain Beaky was, but might just recall Hissing Sid. (All-important stuff, you see.)

At this rewrite stage, I experimented with adding a short first-person, present-tense description of the palace attack from the Jax point of view—a prologue to bookend the novel with the epilogue, and featuring a bit of gore up-front. I also outlined a rewrite of all the subsequent archaeologist reactions in reported speech (Amy explaining to Cockaigne when she reaches the HALF HQ), or as a flashback (Amy dreaming about the attack in the HALF HQ, just before Kadijk's team attack her and her HALF colleagues). However, reported speech is less dynamic and exciting than direct action, and a flashback would hold up the plot. As for the Jax POV, this would have been unique in the book, would have meant cutting something else to fit it in, and was too similar to a narrative device being used in Paul Leonard's *Genocide* (which I hadn't read at that stage).

Finally, I considered a variety of ways of shifting around scene or chapter order so that I could have the Doctor and Sam in the opening chapter of the book, rather than after nearly 8,500 words (almost 10% of the way into the book). But I liked the opening sentence (Amy entering the palace just as the reader is entering the book), and it gave me a chance to have the Doctor and Sam enter a place where we (but not they) already knew there was horror and danger.

I discussed the revisions with Steve via e-mail, and delivered it in good time for the agreed submission deadline (whereupon I received the second half of my advance). This was, effectively, draft 4 of *Kursaal*. I sent it as a Rich Text Format (RTF) file exported from WordPro, and also in a printout with all the changed lines highlighted (a handy feature of Lotus WordPro) to make the editor's job easier. I think I delivered this by hand (what a creep) to Steve, who I met with some other *Doctor Who* people in London one evening for a meal.

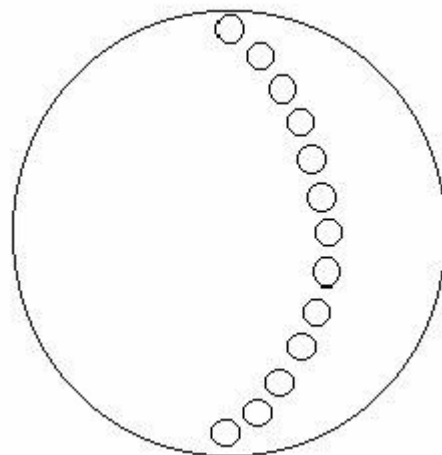
We discussed the revised draft, again via e-mail, around 22 September, and agreed a few minor changes. Steve was amused to see that the Captain Beaky reference was now Gordon the Gopher, and that one of my characters was now... er... a giant gopher.

I asked if I could have a Contents page (which I hadn't seen in previous BBC books) and this was OK-ed. I knew I wanted to use quotations for chapter titles, which would mean more to readers after they'd read the chapter than beforehand—I intended to make each title either a puzzle or to give it more than one meaning in the context of the chapter. I confirmed with Steve the plan to have the "Epilogue" appear on the very last left-hand page, after the Acknowledgements page, and with no entry in the Contents list—a "post credits" sequence, as it were.

One thing I requested at this stage, but which was vetoed, was line art. I hoped to have a frontispiece in the published novel featuring the Jax symbol (left). However, BBC Books thought this was too expensive, and I agreed it wasn't essential. I had thought this was a tremendously original idea, a sort of harking back to the helpful (if poorly drawn) illustrations in the original Target novelisations.

Subsequently I discovered that Martin Day and Keith Topping had asked for line art in *Devil Goblins from Neptune*, and Jim Mortimore had requested it for *Eye of Heaven*, and they were turned down too. Imagine how I'd have sulked if they'd got it but I hadn't.

Here it is anyway, meticulously hand-crafted by me in about ninety seconds in Lotus Freelance. (Is there no start to my talents?)



Steve had written the back cover blurb, and sent it to me earlier in the month for my review and suggestions.

Unfortunately, one correction we requested slipped through the net before the covers were printed (well ahead of the rest of the book): the word “remains” awkwardly appears twice in the second paragraph.

Proof stage

October 1997

I received the copy-editor’s notes (from a company called MFE Editorial Services) on 3 October. This helpfully pointed out a variety of pedantic inconsistencies which would irritate readers—confusion between “jumpsuit” and “tunic”, use of nested quotation marks, consistent capitalization, confusingly similar minor character names, etc. My favourite two were

- a. appropriate use of en-hyphens and ellipses to punctuate a radio message that is breaking up, and
- b. a typo where I said “pulse rate 70 below normal” instead of “70% below normal”. For the later, the copy editor had slightly missed the point, even if he’d spotted there was something amiss: “If heart rate measured in beats per minute, then 70 below normal could even be a minus figure. The normal pulse rate of an adult at rest ranges from 50 to 85 beats per minute, although the mean rate is about 70 to 72 for men.”

He also spotted possible continuity problems, such as the Doctor’s short canine tooth. (Were we happy to commit to such a thing at this stage, he asked? Yes, it was a continuity item from an earlier book where the Doctor lost it and, not being human, is able to grow it back—an addition suggested by Steve.)

The galley proofs came back later in October. But I remember that I had only a few days to read them and make changes. (Editorial changes, rather than simple typos, were discouraged.)

The Final Chapter

November 1997 – January 1998

And so the book went off to the printers. I updated the other authors on what was now in the book, for continuity purposes (including, I think, a potted history of Sam for some of the later authors). I also amused myself by writing a press release for the local papers, in the hope of creating some publicity for the books in local shops. More amusingly, the local papers printed it practically verbatim. I used to be a journalist, so I know how grateful they are in a slack news week for anything they can use with the minimum of effort.

My author copies arrived in December. I resisted the temptation to give signed copies as cheapo Christmas presents. Reviews started to appear in the specialist press.

In January, *Kursaal* was published by BBC Worldwide. It was 19 months since I had first approached the BBC about writing the book.

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