Do it yourself: women, fanzines, and Doctor Who

McMurtry, LG

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Do It Yourself:

Women, Fanzines, and *Doctor Who*

*Leslie McMurtry*

According to Paul Cornell in 1997, the general public would find ‘the idea of magazines produced on an amateur basis extremely improbable’. Nonetheless, not only do *Doctor Who* fanzines exist, they exist in great numbers. Wading into fanzine history is a thorny thicket, and geographical as well as chronological distance makes a broad overview of the subject virtually impossible. What might have been true for *Doctor Who* fanzines in the United States in the mid-1980s—where many women edited, illustrated, and wrote—was quite atypical for the fanzine writers and editors in Britain in the 1990s—where often female fans were treated as a rare and alien species. And different again for the scene of specialized fanzines in Australia and New Zealand where women’s voices were plentiful. And different again in the post-Internet fandom of today.

As Frederick Wertham recorded in 1973, Mary Celeste Kearney in 2006, and Brigid Cherry in 2010, fanzine production and *Doctor Who* fandom have both been dominated by ‘male, middle class, white’ fans. Nevertheless, female *Doctor Who* fanzine participants have always existed. The content of pre-2005 fanzines suggests two fan attitudes: the feminine fan and the nominally-female, or as I term it, ‘gender-blind’, fan. The feminine fan was one who, simply put, was aware of her femininity and allowed this quality to permeate her work: she might not always trumpet the fact she was female, but she never sought to hide it. Alternatively, Jackie Jenkins typifies the ‘gender-blind’ fan, whose writing does not speak to the female, much less to the feminine, experience and utilizes a homogenized ‘Who-speak’. Despite received wisdom, the tide has not turned completely toward ‘feminine’ *Who* writing post-2005, though those who write in that mode often do so self-deprecatingly.

*Figure 7.1 JellyBaby.jpg*

A whiff of Old Boys’ Club

Although *Doctor Who* has stereotypically been an all-male preserve, yet some writers have claimed, as Hickman has, that *Doctor Who* has always had an inherent appeal to women. Orman suggested in *Doctor Who Magazine* in 2005 that the lack of romance in the
Classic series ‘freed girls to try other things’. One strategy for appropriating Doctor Who was through allusion or play, adopting a position of increased femininity to identify with the overtly feminine companions. According to Orman, Sara Kingdom, a take-charge, militaristic woman, would have appealed to playground-age girls. Jo Grant, Liz Shaw, Sarah Jane Smith, Romana, and Nyssa, as ‘working women’, might appeal to girls in late childhood. Rie (Meyer) Sheridan Rose obviously capitalized on Sarah Jane’s appeal and the sense of fan identification when she edited the popular US fanzine From the Notebook of Sarah Jane.

Further, Jackie Marshall suggests, radically for the time, that Tegan’s devotion to the Fifth Doctor is romantic love. Since the ‘majority of females questioned would quite definitely have fancied him’ [the Fifth Doctor], Marshall’s association is one particularly feminine way of engaging with the text. Elizabeth Burak, writing originally in Eye of Orion in 1999, identified with New Adventures companion Bernice Summerfield as representing the anti- ‘Barbie-doll approach to female teachers’. Orman also conjectures that girls might be tempted to identify with the ‘bad girls’ of Who, such as the Rani and Captain Wrack from ‘Enlightenment’. All this seems to underline there are more ways for a girl Who fan to identify than simple feminized-companion/Doctor dichotomy.

Do it yourself

It is a pervasive fallacy that fanzines (that is, fan magazines) arrived on the scene in the late 1970s with the punk movement. Yet, Frederic Wertham has traced them back as far as 1930. As fanzines ‘in their most basic form, require only paper writing implements, and elementary compositional skills’, girls have self-published fan magazines since the 1930s, as Mary Celeste Kearney pointed out in her book Girls Make Media.

Meanwhile, according to Brian J. Robb, organized Doctor Who fandom began in 1965 with the William Hartnell Fan Club. The Doctor Who Appreciation Society (DWAS) was founded in 1976, and by 1980, fan clubs and fan literature was being produced outside of Britain. Gallifrey, Ark in Space, Frontier Worlds, Aggedor, Cygnus Alpha, Shada, Wheel in Space and Space Rat are just some of the many titles during the late ‘70s and mid-‘80s, along with the official DWAS newsletter, Celestial Toyroom. These earliest fanzines existed to contemplate the series itself, while later fanzines offered, in Robb’s words, ‘an outlet for experimentation’.

Women’s presence is not obvious in early Celestial Toyroom copies, but interestingly, they dominate the pen pal columns. According to Ron North writing in 1983, Images was the
first (British) *Doctor Who* fanzine edited by a woman, with *Space Rat* being the second (edited by Jackie Marshall and Val Douglas, later to edit *Queen Bat*). He was mistaken, however; Linda Williams and Geraldine Landen pre-empted these titles. Debates in *Aggedor* in 1984, *Celestial Toyroom/TARDIS* in 1986 and *Queen Bat* in 1987 centered on women’s roles in *Doctor Who* rather than in fandom. John Nathan-Turner was *Doctor Who*’s producer in 1980 and was originally on good terms with the editors of *Doctor Who Bulletin (DWB)*; their falling out created a fanzine whirlpool. *The Frame*, *Purple Haze* and *Cottage Under Siege* (the first openly gay *Who* fanzine) arose out of the resulting cultures and counter-cultures.

The situation was somewhat different in North America, due to many factors but crystallizing around a fandom that was, in Kathleen Toth’s words, ‘distinctly older’, meaning an average age of 30. Jody Lynn Nye stressed in *Chicks Dig Time Lords* that most fans she met were female from every conceivable walk of life, and writer Kathryn Sullivan was representative of this kind of fandom, encountering her first fanzine at MediaWest*Con 1 in Lansing, Michigan in 1981. Wayne Rooper in 2000 went on at length about this difference, saying some British fans were guilty of being ‘po-faced and painfully sanctimonious’, and both he and Michael Burgess, writing in 1993, seemed to agree that, in effect, female fans bring in badly-needed humour and were sorely missed in British fandom.

American fanzines were often twice as long as British ones, and virtually every North American fanzine title from the 1980s was edited by a woman, with art and fiction provided by both sexes. Paulie Gilmore, editor of *Jelly Baby Chronicles* from 1983, did much of her own artwork and fiction-writing as well as contributing to other zines; issue three from 1984 featured a portfolio from Cheryl Whitfield Duval, who edited two fanzines of her own, *Time Log* and *Rassilon’s Star*, and published a vast quantity of art and writing in other titles.

Meanwhile, in Australia, a similar gender parity was at work, with Sarah Prefect joking in 1985 that she would trigger a mass wave of immigration when she announced that the male:female ratio of fans aged fifteen to 25 was almost 1:1. It is unclear whether this was the case in New Zealand, with Rochelle Thickpenny—later assistant editor of the New Zealand Doctor Who Fan Club fanzine *Time/Space Visualiser*—writing in 1992, ‘you ever notice how girls are in the minority when it comes to liking *Doctor Who*’
A rare breed?

A shift seemed to occur in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s in British fandom, coinciding with the demise of *Queen Bat*. In 1991, for example, fan Karen Dunn was called ‘an unusual phenomenon’ at the Fitzroy Tavern, according to the Tav-based zine *Private Lives*. *Private Lives*, which arrived in the wake of cross-fandom cooperation along with *Brave New World, Alien Corn, Top, Club Tropicana,* and *Circus*, features a back cover cartoon in 1992 of ‘The Woman Who Came to the Tavern’, emphasizing her isolation and horror. Dunn wrote about her experience in 2009 in *The Terrible Zodin*, ‘There was nothing more likely to bring the Juke Box at the Fitzroy Tavern scraping to a halt than a woman in a Tom Baker T-shirt strolling in and offering the barman a jelly baby’. Moreover, as North American fandom participation slowed down, female contributors to British zines grew scarce.

Fan fiction was written by both men and women. Indeed, male writers dominated DWAS’ fiction zine *Cosmic Masque* until the 1990s. Women writers did show a particular affinity for ‘mash ups’, from Clare Ford’s *Doctor Who* and *Blakes 7* work in *Queen Bat* (1985) to Cheryl Whitfield Duval’s book-length, self-illustrated combination of *Doctor Who* and *Amadeus, Sing Sweetly, Sing Strong* (1990). Catherine Siemann contributed the truly prescient comic ‘The Epic of Doctor Who’, in which Hollywood execs ruin *Doctor Who*, in *Jelly Baby Chronicles* (1983).

<Figure 7.3 Uncensored>

*Bafflegab* is one US fanzine which brought an unashamedly feminine touch to *Who* fan writing. ‘Uncensored Scenes We’d Love to See’ by Cheryl Whitfield Duval is an energized flight of fancy showing romantic scenes between a variety of Doctor/companion pairs. In 1986, Audrey Baker lambasted the majority of fan fiction writers in *Queen Bat*, scorning ‘The Romantic’ (Mary Sue), ‘The Adult’ (sexual shipping), and slash for ‘offloading [the writer’s] own daydreams’ on us. Val Douglas defended fan fiction after Baker’s assault, suggesting it was written ‘because we girls aren’t exactly well-catered for where dirty books are concerned’. If fanazines such as *Bafflegab* were, in riot grrrl chronicler Teal Triggs’ words, ‘a safe space to poke fun at men’, the 1999 erotic fan fiction anthology edited by Lori Grenci, *Warm Gallifreyan Nights*, took the feminine aspect one step further—and earned the sharp scorn of male fans, as Orman reports.
Gender-neutral content like poetry and filks (science fiction song parodies) were supplemented by nonfiction from a female perspective. Deborah Morton’s ‘Pulp Friction’ in *Shockeye’s Kitchen* Twelve is a column about her Who-obsessed boyfriend and his wall of merchandise with references to naughty themed games, and signed ‘♥ Debs xx’. In *Who* fanzines, even those with content by women, symbols like ♥ are extremely rare, though Jackie Marshall advertised for her upcoming fanzine *Space Rat* in 1982 by placing an ad in *Celestial Toyroom* imitating the style of a cross-stitch pattern. Certainly rare are what might be termed feminist tracts; one such is Sarah Groenewegen’s ‘Frocks, Coats, and Dress (Non)sense’ from *Bog Off!,* what Cornell termed the ‘determinedly radical’ Australian zine. This piece not only identifies (with reluctance, given Groenewegen’s resistance to labels) the author as a lesbian *Who* fan, it also highlights the problems of cross-dressing within sci fi fandoms.

**Jackie Jenkins and the ‘gender-blind’ fandom**

In 1990, Vanessa Bishop wrote the poem ‘Oh! To Be a Fanboy’ in the pages of *Purple Haze.* There is nothing gender-, or orientation-specific, about the poem; it’s about the fan convention experience, as encapsulated in the all-embracing line, ‘Cor, I fancy her, I fancy him’. However, fanzine editor Alistair McGown’s response, reprinted immediately afterwards by Cornell in *Licence Denied!,* was inspired by the photos of Bishop as much as anything she wrote. Further, both Jenkins and Orman indicate they have been many times assumed to be lesbians by mere dint of being female *Who* fans. Jenkins, though heterosexual, mostly prefers to keep gender out of *Doctor Who,* and Orman, self-confessed ‘gender non-conforming’, dislikes the persistent assumptions (her emphasis).

Gender non-conforming is at the heart of Jackie Jenkins, the pseudonymous female *Who* writer commissioned by Gary Gillatt in 1997 to be *Doctor Who Magazine*’s ‘trendy’ answer to Bridget Jones. Although Jenkins never wrote in a fanzine, I use her experience and style of writing to stand for the gender-blind fan writer. She may have been, in Gillatt’s words, ‘the greatest writer about *Doctor Who* there has ever been’, but she was also ‘still’ a girl. This is exactly how she was introduced in *DWM* 251 in May 1997. ‘Why can’t people’, Jenkins asks in *Chicks Dig Time Lords,* ‘remember me for me?’

Jenkins is a female fan who resists being dragged into the spotlight as female and would rather pursue her fannishness in a prose made up of experiences that are gender-neutral. She epitomizes what Brigid Cherry calls ‘*Who* speak’, derived from the early years
of *Doctor Who* fanzines, Terrance Dicks’ Target novel descriptions, production terms, self-deprecating language, and acronyms. ‘Who speak’ is used in gender-neutral fanzine content, which I would argue is the dominant mode of pre-2005 female *Who* fanzine writers. ‘Who speak’ also came in handy in parody. Audrey Baker’s ‘The Doctor as a Sexpot’ was against the Doctor being sexual on screen, and ‘Who’s a Naughty Boy’ by Val Douglas was a firmly tongue-in-cheek response, as was her poem about Susan, ‘Oh No! We Mustn’t Mention Her’.

The dominant expression of gender-blind fandom was in analytical/critical/fandom pieces, ranging from Jackie Roe’s report on the Manchester Fan Olympiad in 1991 in *Private Lives* to Amanda Murray’s piece on ‘Pertwee’ from *DWB*. Vanessa Bishop embodies this writing at its best, and her fan journey is described in *Licence Denied!* in terms virtually identical to a male fan’s. When she says, ‘I love everything about Tom Baker down to the cilia of his nostrils’, we know this is not a particularly feminized love.

*Figure 7.4 Book*

**Fandom regenerates**

Post-1991, due to the open submissions policies of the *New Adventures* and the inclusive principles of *Doctor Who Magazine* editors John Freeman, Gary Russell, and Gary Gillatt, writing for fanzines was seen as less prestigious, because the poachers were turning gamekeepers, so to speak. The Noughties were also seen as, in Robin Barnard’s words from the first issue of *Panic Moon*, ‘seemingly the dying days of the printed fanzine, with the Internet cemented as the hub of fandom’. As Robb reported, by 2008, fanzines were ‘few and far between’, with *Whotopia, Enlightenment* (fanzine of Canada’s *Doctor Who* Information Network), *Myth Makers* (a fiction zine also produced by DWIN), *Celestial Toyroom, Time/Space Visualiser* and *Live from Mars* soldiering on.

Nevertheless, a ‘fanzine renaissance’ became manifest from about that year; the ‘resurgence in fanzines’ is described by Daniel Gee, editor of *Fish Fingers and Custard* in 2010. Along with *FFAC*, the other zines to be described in this influx were *Shooty Dog Thing, Rassilon’s Rod*, and *Blue Box*. Certainly the hard-copy zines were celebrated for their authenticity against their ‘posh PDF cousins’, as *Blue Box*’s David MacGowan put it. *Rassilon’s Rod*, in particular, was celebrated for being, in Paul Castle’s words, ‘deliberately
retro’, unconsciously echoing the ‘cut-n-paste aesthetic’ of riot grrrl publications like *Kitten Scratches.*

Much more visibly than the changes going on within fanzines, the incursion of female fans en masse, post-2005, as described by Lizbeth Myles is linked to the ‘rise of the fangirl’. Robb identifies this increase in female fans with David Tennant. The perceived sexiness of Tennant was no doubt, as Wallace notes, used as a marketing tool for the 2006 series, but if, as Jackie Jenkins suggests in 2008, ‘Tennant happened and suddenly every woman in the office is a dyed-in-the-wool fan’, post-2005 fanzines are surprisingly mute on this point. Perhaps the silence is due to what Wertham affectionately described as the ‘sincere and spontaneous’ writing that once characterized fanzines migrating to pseudonymous blogs and message boards, with fiction retreating to Livejournal and A Teaspoon and An Open Mind. The most in-depth fanzine study on the feelings and values of ‘Tennant fangirls’ was conducted by the male editor of *Fish Fingers and Custard* in 2010. This piece was a series of interviews with six self-described ‘fangirls’, who challenged the stereotypes. They could not agree on a favourite Tenth Doctor story nor on a reason why they admired and lusted after Tennant so much. All participants except two agreed Tennant’s good looks were ‘icing on the cake’ to his other qualities. Julie Chaston in *Enlightenment* in 2010 wrote an elegy to Tennant that said absolutely nothing about his looks or sex appeal.

The second reason given is, in Robb’s words, the show’s new ‘emotional intelligence’. Men and women have remarked on the changes wrought in fan discourse. ‘Genuine love and passion and human interest in the Tardis [sic]? YES PLEASE!’ David MacGowan wrote in *Blue Box*. This emotional intelligence has caused some female fans to abandon ‘gender-blind’ and invest more of their femininity in their writing. Katie Steely-Brown in *FFAC* 11 is able to discuss romance in New *Who* as part of a larger, more gender-neutral appeal of *Doctor Who* to a (presumably) North American audience. Abby Peck seems to reclaim Sarah Jane as almost a heroine for the riot grrrl movement. Emma Donovan and Chloe Hardy let loose torrents of ‘fangirlish’ emotion on the pages of *FFAC*, a refreshing and representative contrast that marks it as uniquely post-2005. There is a certain amount of playful self-deprecation in writing like this which seems to echo one of the elements of ‘*Who* speak’ detailed above.

Certainly, too, analytical and critical writing are well-represented by female writers such as Fiona Moore, Amanda Barton, Karen Davies and Deborah Stanish; Lloyd Rose and Nina Kolunovsky in *Enlightenment*; Lisa Parker and Lydia Butz in *Panic Moon*, Aya
Vandenbussche, Lori Jansen, Evan Keraminas, Deborah Taylor, Hannah Rothman, and Leslie
McMurtry in *The Terrible Zodin*, and Elizabeth Peloso, Lisa Carroll and Caron Lindsay in
*FFAC*. Editor Lea distributes fanzine *Venusian Spearmint* in the Fitzroy Tavern ‘in the
attempt’, she says, ‘to keep the old traditions alive in the Internet age of blogs and Twitter’.
Artwork by female fans has positively exploded in post-2005 fanzines, including *Panic Moon*
(whose writers are 90% male) and *The Terrible Zodin*, and *FFAC* (which has included a piece
by Tabitha Mounteer on ‘How to Make a TARDIS Blanket’). Even if male fans such as Paul
Castle have admitted to wanting to craft a K9 soft toy out of denim, it seems unlikely a pre-
2005 fanzine would have included a craft feature in its pages, except to ridicule it.
Meanwhile, the comics fanzine *Vworp Vworp*, released in 2009 and edited by Gareth
Kavanagh and Colin Brockhurst, has as yet had no female contributors. Orman found in
2010 that *DWM*’s survey respondents are still 71 per cent male.

**Conclusion**

‘A fanzine is something that people do together’ wrote Daniel Gee in 2010. Even in
2012, fanzines maintain their essence of ‘newness’ which the editor of *Hippycore* linked with
underground punk fanzines in Paul Rutherford’s *Fanzine Cultures*. Graeme Burk and Robert
Smith?, editors of *Time, Unincorporated*, have suggested that the Internet has actually caused
the fanzine to flourish once more. Whether at the forefront or the fringes, whether hidden by
a mirage of ‘those limp, greasy-haired young men’ as Brigid Cherry called them in 1989, or
providing covers, editing, and writing for a fanzine, female *Doctor Who* fanzine participants
are present. Stanish has repeatedly likened the way boys approach sci fi to baseball statistics.
As for the girls, she says in *Enlightenment* 135, ‘they may be looking for something different
in the show . . . but they are just as committed’. In *Aggedor* 5 (1984), Pam Baddeley
suggested that the reason men dominated *Who* fandom was because ‘women are educated to
relate to people more than to abstract concepts’. Perhaps there is also a confusion of terms;
Kim Dickson wrote in 1996 that ‘current estimates say that at least 10 per cent of the
population, when pressed, will admit to enjoying *Doctor Who*, but don’t identify as *Doctor
Who* fans’. Is and should *Doctor Who* fanzine writing be ‘sexless’? It’s a question that will
continue to be discussed as long as there are fanzines, and though their deaths have been
predicted many times, they do what the Doctor does best: keep on regenerating.
Go Further

Book Chapters/Articles

‘The Importance of Being Brilliant’
Julie Chaston

‘Foreword’
Gary Gillatt

‘The Shipping News’ and ‘It’s Not You, It’s Me’
Deborah Stanish

‘Benny Accolade’
Elizabeth Burak

‘Squee, Retcon, Fanwank, and the Not-We: Computer-Mediated Discourse and the Online Audience for NuWho’
Brigid Cherry

‘Being Jackie Jenkins: Memoirs from a Parallel Universe’
Jackie Jenkins

‘Hopelessly Devoted to Who’
Jody Lynn Nye
‘My Fandom Regenerates’
Deborah Stanish

‘The Fanzine Factor’
Kathryn Sullivan

‘Editor’s Page’
Clayton Hickman

‘Girls Allowed’
Kate Orman

‘Oh! To Be a Fanboy’ and ‘My Noddy Holder Badge’
Vanessa Bishop

‘Frocks, Coats, and Dress (Non)sense’
Sarah J Groenewegen

‘Together-Ness’
Alistair McGown

‘Pertwee’
Amanda Murray
Graeme Burk and Robert Smith? (eds.)
(Des Moines, IA: Mad Norwegian Press, 2010 and 2011)

Single White Who Fan: The Life and Times of Jackie Jenkins
Jackie Jenkins

(The Best of) Shooty Dog Thing
Paul Castle

Timeless Adventures: How Doctor Who Conquered TV
Brian J. Robb
(Harpenden, Herts: Kamera Books, 2009)

‘Do It Yourself’ Girl Revolution: Ladyfest, Performance, and Fanzine Culture
Teal Triggs
(London: London College of Communication, 2009)

Girls Make Media
Mary Celeste Kearney
(London: Taylor & Francis, 2006)

Licence Denied!: Rumblings from the Doctor Who Underground
Paul Cornell (ed.)

Fanzine Culture
Paul Rutherford
(Glasgow: Clydesdale Press, 1992)

The World of Fanzines: A Special Form of Communication
Frederic Wertham
(Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1973)

Internet

Some Doctor Who fanzines are occasionally available on eBay (such as Console Room, Bafflegab, Jelly Baby Chronicles, and Private Lives). I was fortunate enough to be able to consult several fan-run ‘archives’ which included some of the older print fanzines (such as
Celestial Toyroom, Frontier Worlds, Queen Bat, and Space Rat). Below are links to databases and indices of some of the older paper fanzines.

‘Is That a TARDIS In Your Closet?’ Kim Dickson (1996), Happiness Patrol
http://www.reocities.com/Area51/Lair/8022/HappinessPatroll.html#Kim
‘Burnt Toast’ Tabula Rasa http://www.tabula-rasa.info/BurntToast/
‘Classic Genzine Fan Fiction Archive’ http://www.debwalsh.com/fanficarchive/authors.html
‘The Doctor Who Fanzine Database’ Bob Furnell
http://web.archive.org/web/20070927212729/thefanzinedatabase.tvheaven.com/a-z.htm
‘The Doctor Who Fanzine Preservation Project’ Nick Seidler
http://homepages.bw.edu/~jcurtis/dwfpp.htm
‘List of Doctor Who Fanzines’ Fanlore
http://fanlore.org/wiki/List_of_Doctor_Who_Fanzines

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