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Public Intellectuals

An Interview with Kate Orman

As one of the Australia's most prolific and popular young authors, Kate Orman's intellectual work reaches readers around the world. She has written twelve novels (four of them co-authored) and a co-authored novella, from *The Left-Handed Hummingbird* (1993) to *Blue Box* (2003). These have sold over a hundred thousand copies worldwide, and she has received widespread critical acclaim. Four of her books have been shortlisted for Australia's Aurealis award for 'Best Australian SF novel'.

Orman works almost exclusively within the SF genre - specifically within the subgenre of TV tie-in, using the BBC's television series *Doctor Who* to provide the universe in which she places her novels. She blends, as many SF authors do, the exploration of ideas with the traditional strengths of popular culture - accessible narrative and recognisable characters. Orman uses these genre novels to explore ethical issues of some complexity: and speaking to this successful public intellectual gives us an insight into the intellectual work of popular culture. When is it acceptable to kill and what are the ramifications of such an action? How are ethical issues addressed in popular novels? What makes a character into a hero? And what is the social function of heroic fantasy?

Question: What interests me about your books, from an intellectual standpoint, is the work that you do ethically trying to work out when it is acceptable to fight back - when violence becomes acceptable. You're renowned for torturing your central characters, physically and emotionally. Particularly the Doctor, who's been possessed, stabbed, he's had alien creatures growing inside him. Are you just pushing him to see how far you have to go before it's acceptable to fight back?

Kate Orman: No. I don't think it's a matter of, you push somebody enough, eventually they get sufficiently pissed off, or justified in fighting back. I think one of the things about the Doctor is that you can throw abso-bloody-lutely anything at him and he will come through that and he will still win I mean this is a guy you can't kill - you kill him, he just regenerates [the character of the Doctor, from the British TV series *Doctor*

Who, can change into a new form when he's killed and be 'reborn'. This conceit allowed the production team to change lead actor on a regular basis]. And so he has that kind of completely unbeatable quality, which I think in a hero, to see somebody who is simply unbeatable, is inspiring. Because I'm very beatable...

Q: He obviously behaves, from your point of view, impeccably, ethically. He does the right thing.

KO: I think he tries to and then sometimes he buggers it up ... [Some] authors will do absolutely anything to get the Doctor out of making an actual difficult ethical decision – for example, his companion ends up killing the bad guy so he doesn't have to decide whether to do it. For me the quintessential example is in [1984 Peter Davison/fifth Doctor TV story] *Resurrection of the Daleks* where he ... decides that the only way to solve the problem of Davros [creator of the Daleks] is to shoot Davros, because he's such a threat to everything in the world. So he trots along to kill Davros and then Davros is trying to talk him out of shooting him, and you can see the Doctor's going 'What am I doing? No, I really need to do this! Oh my God, I can't do this, I'm too wimpy'. And then there's a noise outside, he goes out the door and Davros closes the door, and he goes, 'Oh bugger, now I can't shoot Davros'. It's a complete abdication of responsibility; or responsibility has been abdicated for him, if you can say that. He never had to make a decision, he toyed with a decision. He was confronted with a decision, but he never had to make it. Or in *Genesis of the Daleks* he has the famous scene where he's got the two wires: will he or won't he blow up the baby Daleks? Does he have the right? Somebody comes along and says, 'Oh, I've got something else for you to do instead', and he goes, 'Oh good' and runs off. And in the end somebody else blows up the Daleks, so again he never had to make a decision. So he tends to be a guy who always strives to do the right thing and will think very hard sometimes about what that right thing is, but so often he gets out of having to do it ... He's intensely moral to the point where he may do something that may frighten the hell out of you ... because it is the right thing to do. I mean blowing up Skaro [home planet of the Daleks, in the 1989 Sylvester McCoy/seventh Doctor TV story *Remembrance of the Daleks*] in one smaller framework is absolutely the right thing to do, and so he takes that hard decision and he does it ... Blowing up Gallifrey [his home planet, in the 2000 tie-in novel *The Ancestor Cell*] - after it had been totally taken over by

Faction Paradox who would have just wrecked the universe - blowing up Gallifrey and killing off his entire species and his whole culture and their timeline, was absolutely the right thing to do. But at the same time it's this hideous act of, essentially, genocide ... I don't think it's a metaphor for anything in the real world, except very vaguely about sometimes you have to grit your teeth and actually do something. You can't just sit around going, 'Oh oh, that's so terrible' - you have to take a stand.

Q ... [The question is] when does the Doctor kill? On the television program it's easy - he kills but only if [the villain's] green and faceless. If it has a face, he won't kill it. And then you have all the various set ups in the program, as you say, that allow the events to be finished without him having to do it - whether that's the companion doing it, or a kind of clever narrative twist where the villain ends up falling into their own trap ... And it's obvious in the novels that you're not happy with that - that you want to know, When is it acceptable to kill somebody? How bad do they have to be? You were saying before that he makes the hard decisions, he does the right thing - and that's a complex position to take. It's not a simplistic, The villains are bad, we have to bomb them. It's not just good and bad. It's, how do we decide when it is acceptable to kill somebody? And you've been working through that in the novels. Can I just ask you to talk a bit about what you would say yourself, having written all these now, about when the Doctor becomes justified in what is essentially murder?

KO: I mean there's pushover ones like, 'Oh no I'm going to blow up the earth', 'I shoot you', The End. So there's ones where the Doctor's put in a blatantly inescapable position. I'm not sure that I'd put him in that ... Just as a side note, it's really interesting when you talk to the fans that [they think] it's OK for the Doctor to kill somebody so long as he feels bad about it afterwards - and that can be quite blatant. He can be committing quite horrendous murders, but we all stand around going, 'Oh isn't that terrible that he had to do that'. But then he kills off Shockeye [in the 1985 Colin Baker/sixth Doctor TV story *The Two Doctors*, the Doctor kills an alien with a cyanide-soaked rag], which is not only moral, but an act of complete self-preservation - Shockeye is about to eat his best friend, he's threatened to eat everybody in the world, and is about to tear the Doctor's head off with his bare hands, so the Doctor poisons him to death. And then he [the Doctor] makes

a joke. He doesn't say, 'Oh, no, but I had to do this terrible thing' ... And people were absolutely up in arms about it.

Q: I'm thinking even just in [Kate's 1995 tie-in book] *Set Piece* [where a sentient time ship is ripping holes in the fabric of space time], he kills the Ship in a quite straightforward kind of way.

K: Yes you could almost say there's [a] bit of revenge ... because the ship did some pretty appalling things to him in lavish detail. And I think in that case there's a simple imperative: the ship was ripping time up as well as doing terrible things to people, so it has to be bumped off. But it doesn't have a face, so that's an interesting point ...

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Q: The idea that it's OK to kill someone as long as you feel bad about it afterwards is interesting, because running through your books, there's a consistent insistence of the value of every life - even while these huge wars are going on and people think the details aren't important. There's a line ... in [*The Left-Handed Hummingbird* [Kate's first *Doctor Who* novel, published in 1993] where the Doctor says, 'No one is no one' ...

...

KO: Or the villagers getting massacred in *Room with no Doors* [Kate's final seventh Doctor novel, published in 1997] might be another example of that, where the Doctor ends up holding the little girl who's been shot [through with an arrow and killed, the arrow going into the Doctor as well], so you get there, the collateral damage. The Doctor is on the ground. A lot of the time there's this chaos and war going on and he's sort of forced to, or he chooses to, engage with that. He's not often in a spaceship, looking down and things are blowing up: he's there carrying the dead little girl around ... I think that part of it's important ...

Q: When you were saying that it's alright as long as the Doctor feels bad about it afterwards, I was thinking more than that just being a kind of throwaway line, that might actually be part of a workable system of ethics: that you insist that there are some people in the books - and the Doctor is the example - [who] see the right thing that has to be done and do it, no matter how hard it is. But it's never done casually. It's always done with an awareness that every life is valuable. Which is almost like the definition of the

hero figure: heroes are people who are willing to take on the responsibility of murder when it has to be done.

KO: Interesting way of looking at it. But then you get, in popular culture particularly, the people who it's OK to kill. ... A good example is the Storm Troopers and all the empire guys in the *Star Wars* trilogy. It is absolutely acceptable to kill those guys in *Star Wars* and nobody bats an eyelid. And it's slavery, and all this stuff going on, all this really morally ambiguous stuff going on in *Star Wars* that nobody bats an eyelid at ... Again we're talking about, what is the justification? You've got a total emergency, you've got obvious self defence ... the question you're maybe getting at is when is the Doctor entitled to act as an executioner? When can he pass judgement on somebody else and say 'you are so bad' - and it has to be 'you are so bad' not 'you are so dangerous' because then that's an emergency again ... When he kills off [alien] Sutekh in [1975 Tom Baker/fourth Doctor TV story] *Pyramids Of Mars*, Sutekh's coming down the time tunnel, and is ageing to death, and the Doctor doesn't say, 'Look you were going to destroy earth, and you leave dust wherever you walk' ... he says 'The time of the Osirans is long over'. And that's more like a judgement: 'If you no longer belong to this universe, you're not fit for it, it's not appropriate for you, so you should go away because this isn't your time anymore'. And I thought that was an astonishing line, it's like he needed an additional justification ... And maybe the reason we wiggle out of having the Doctor make that kind of moral or ethical framework visible ... is that then we have this character who is deciding for himself. It's sort of an existential thing - nobody else is telling him what's moral. He has to make it up for himself. That's that is really challenging and lonely - and dangerous. You are very dangerous if you are that person who just does what he thinks is right. Maybe we're a little bit scared of that and so we sort of tend to pull back from it.

Q: There are two opposing things about the framework that we inherit from the TV series. On the one hand, the character is presented as being so individualistic that he must have his own moral system that isn't simply what he inherits from his culture - because he's rejected that completely [in the original TV show it was established that the Doctor was an iconoclastic maverick figure who had run away from his own home planet because he found it too ordered and stultifying]. But on the other hand, it's not so much

science fiction as an adventure genre framework that we inherit from the program: in *Doctor Who* there *is* good and bad, there *is* a Black and White Guardian [the universe's 'gods' of good and evil, introduced in the program's sixteenth season]. So there's this very simple framework, that only works in adventure genre. It doesn't work in real life.

KP: Yeah, hugely. That's why sometimes discussions about the Doctor's morality or his ethical decisions sometimes get mixed up with real life stuff, and you can't compare it. It would be too much like trying to base your politics on Indiana Jones or something like that ... It's difficult ... [in] a real world situation [to] say, 'Well, the Doctor did this in this situation, so if he were sort of confronted with, you know, Iran's nuclear weapons program he would do such and such'.

Q: You refuse, in your writing, to accept the simple black and white. You never have the Doctor say, 'You're evil ... evil since the dawn of time ... I must kill you'. That never happens in your books ...

KO: ... I couldn't think of an example of the Doctor just killing somebody [in her books] and then I realized that's always because he thinks, 'They're a person, can I get them out of this as well?' ... I'd like to think that the Doctor's being merciful and he thinks, 'Surely I can get even the bad guy out of the situation ...' Especially, I think, when the bad guy is a flawed human rather than some vast cosmic force or blobby monster ... I think if you write a really good character - and I'm not sure that I've ever accomplished this - your reader should be thinking, 'I could be that bad guy, I can imagine myself getting into those shoes, or I can be a bit like that sometimes, what if I went the whole way and I turned into this criminal': and then you need somebody to drag you back from the brink and say, 'I won't allow you to do the bad things, but neither am I just going to lop your head off ...'

...

Q: ... You said before, [that these stories] don't apply metaphorically to the real world, you're not working out a value system that could actually apply in everyday life - but you also use the word inspiring, that the Doctor as hero can be inspiring, even if he's not a role model ...

KO: I see what you're getting at - there is some connection between the fiction and real life ... I think, particularly with things the way they are at the moment in the world, and world politics, just to say, 'This situation is complicated and perhaps the bad guys aren't as bad as we thought', is actually to say something reasonably radical. Which is tragic. That's such an obvious, even dumb thing to say: 'Perhaps the situation is a bit more complicated, perhaps the bad guys aren't just simply bad'. But it's just not the way that world leaders seem to be thinking at the moment ...

Q: In the later Virgin period [Virgin Publishing released the series of *Doctor Who* spin-off novels between 1991 and 1997, after the program was cancelled from television. The series was then taken up by BBC books], when you, Paul [Cornell], Ben [Aaronovitch] and Andrew [Cartmel] were writing, the Doctor wasn't a pacifist, but there was this kind of humanist thing. There was this idea that you never take a life lightly, that before you murder, you stop and think about it - if it's as banal as that. But there was also this incredible sense of hope and optimism about these books ... Even when the Doctor's tortured, ripped to bits, suffers all kinds of agony - because it's genre fiction, and because the character isn't human, and because he just gets back up, whatever you throw at him - he never retaliates. He gets angry, there's flashes of anger, but he never tortures in return. Maybe that's the difference - he kills but he never tortures in return. And the universe, in the end, turns out alright. It's really old fashioned values that are being championed: decency, and tolerance ...

KO: There's a great saying, which I actually used as an epigram, in one of the books... it's a Joan Baez quote, and it appears, I think, in *Hummer* [that is, *The Left-Handed Hummingbird*]: Non-violence is a flop, but the only worse flop is violence. If the Doctor did retaliate, using violence - which would be very easy for him, he's a very powerful guy, he could whip up some super scientific thing, and blow everybody away - it'll make the situation worse, it won't solve the problem. It's an interesting thing to think that having only recently come down out of the trees, we only have a very short term point of view. We barely see past the next meal. Politicians barely see past their next opportunity to be elected. All you need, say you're an American leader, is an eleven year point of view - because the dictator that you are supporting now, and giving guns and money to now, in ten or eleven year's time is going to be your enemy and you're going to have to

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spend more money and get more guns in order to put them out of power so that you can then install another dictator and have a war with them in ten years. Where I think if you're the Doctor, you've got a ten thousand year point of view - and you know that if you blow these guys away, their relatives will come and kill you. Or you've wrecked the planet and now nobody can live there, or all you've done is piss off a bunch of people and everybody's dead, so the people that you wanted to save have been killed - or the people who just needed a good knock on the head and to be told, 'Don't behave like that, that's stupid'. The Doctor is still slightly puzzled by evil, because it's dumb. It doesn't make any sense - it's the most stupid way to go around doing things. It looks like it fixes the problem ... [but] you haven't thought through what you're doing at all ... You haven't thought through the consequences - not just bodies lying on the ground, but what will happen in five years, ten years, a hundred years as a result of that. Because the result's always some bloody disaster. And you might have a mixed result where you get some good out of it - you can't pretend that getting rid of Saddam Hussein isn't great, but who's going to be their next leader? ... And then you think, well, the US supported Saddam, who will they support next? Has this in fact, in the long term, been a good thing? ...

Q: ... Human culture is evolving exponentially ... And one thing that's been around for only about forty or fifty years is the very idea of environmentalism ... As a popular idea, that's brand new And it's spreading so quickly ... And what that is, when you break it down, isn't just caring about fluffy animals - it's about taking a larger viewpoint. It's getting away from [thinking about] the next meal and [instead] thinking about, like you're saying, a hundred years time, two hundred years time ... Now that's a very different way of thinking, it's very new for us as human beings, and it sounds as though you're saying that's the perspective that the Doctor allows you to think from: a kind of perfect environmentalist, but the environment of the universe.

KO: That's a really nice way of putting it - he's a greenie for the whole cosmos! ...

Q: You mentioned briefly the idea of other philosophical systems, particularly from eastern cultures, and historical cultures as well. Again you're quite explicit about this in the novels, you introduce characters who speak for the other systems - Sun Tzu, the

Aztecs and so on. Is that just an archival interest - you're a researcher, and you're interested in these things - or do you actually think there's still a usefulness in these alternative belief systems?

KO: I think anything that gets you out of your own headspace is extremely valuable ... When you actually for a moment grasp a concept from a totally different culture, you've just stepped back far enough to have a look at yourself, which is the most extraordinary experience ... You fall into this thing where [you think that] everybody has Santa Claus, he just wears a different hat. So in Africa, [you think], Santa Claus is black, [because] everybody's got Santa Claus. Everybody *doesn't* have Santa Claus - and even just realizing that is a hell of a shock to the system. So bringing these ideas from outside and getting different perspectives, and then trying to create alien perspectives is the biggest challenge you can get for a science fiction writer. Your first and most obvious gap is to go and get some culture that most people in the West aren't familiar with and just graft those things over. This is why we always get the Samurai: the Klingons are the Samurai and the Minbari are the Samurai and aliens always bang on about honour and things like that. And that's just because to the Americans, the Japanese look like they're from space. So that's kind of a primitive way of doing it, but it's one step on the way of, 'OK, can I really get out of my own normal thinking and look back?' I think the Doctor provides an interesting opportunity to do that, because he is at once human and alien, and at once mortal and godlike, and at once English and from Gallifrey. So I think there's a potential there to try and get that different perspective ...

...

Q: One of the interesting things about fandoms generally - *Doctor Who* fandom is just one example - is that it does become a critical community for close textual analysis ... It's not the traditional kind of English Literature text analysis, but the amount of attention that people would pay to one of the novels of *Doctor Who* - there's very few popular culture texts, outside of fan cultures, that get that kind of attention. And one of the interesting things is that the whole fan paraphernalia around the texts gives you critical reading guidelines - what you should be interested in looking for when you're reading this text. Now a lot of it is the continuity-trivia stuff, but ... we've also got in *Doctor*

Who fandom a basic theory of forms, narrative and their ethics to apply as you are reading these books, and its called 'Guns and Frocks' [see below]. We know that there are different kinds of narratives and we know that they have different ethical priorities. In [Kate's 1996 novel] *Sleepy*, at the end, Bernice says, 'Frocks are the purpose of life ...'. I think it's interesting thinking about what Guns and Frocks means - and your commitment to the frocks. Could you just talk about that a little?

KO: The 'Guns and Frocks' thing dates back a few years now. I think it's [*Doctor Who* novelist] Gareth Roberts who said that *Doctor Who* needs less guns and more frocks. And it became a very quick shorthand for two rough schools of writing in the *Doctor Who* novels: one of which was militaristic space opera books that were very serious, and took themselves very seriously; and then at completely the other end of the spectrum, very camp ones that did not take themselves seriously.... At the far end of the frock spectrum, are stories where you realize the author is winking and saying '*Doctor Who* is crap, and I know and so do you ...' - but not in an affectionate way ... That far end of frockishness, where you realize there's actually contempt for the material, not affectionate teasing, that's at least as bad as stodgy stories about men with moustaches who are called Field Marshall Something-or-other and go about blowing up the Daleks or something ...

Another guy describes it as the difference between fluffy and spiky. Jon [Blum, Kate's husband and sometime writing partner] and my stuff was always too fluffy - too many happy endings, too many people sitting around having tea and crumpets and being nice to each other. Whereas the spiky end of things, presumably was people being horrible to each other and blowing each other up. Somewhere in between is realism, I suspect! Where people are not necessarily vicious and stupid but more self motivated.

Q: The frocks also remind me about something that's often promised in *Doctor Who* but often forgotten about: the idea that, as well as the fight against evil and the struggles against violence and death, supposedly the Doctor also had a delight in the small things in life. You'd often hear this given by script editors as something they'd go for, but often that didn't come through. That was something that was delightful in Sylvester McCoy's [the seventh Doctor on television] stories. Dancing to Fifties' music [as the Doctor does in the 1987 story *Delta and the Bannermen*] is actually worth living for. [In Kate's novel *So Vile a Sin*, companion] Roz gets strapped into her corset to go to this wedding on an

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alien planet, and thinks that perhaps it's things like this that life worth living. That's why you would fight the Daleks - it's so you can wear a frock afterwards and dance.

KO: We've just been watching the extended *Fellowship of the Ring* and they talk a lot about how when Frodo looks into the mirror, they added a bit where he sees his home, the Shire, being overrun, turned into a factory, burnt down, everybody's enslaved - so that he knows what it is he's trying to save. And it is very ordinary stuff. In Hobbiton, they dance, they eat too much, and they drink too much, and maybe that's all it is. They're having a lovely time and it's very peaceful and what a terrible thing to lose. And they quoted a bit of Elvish poetry: 'I don't love the sword for its brightness, or the arrow for its swiftness, I only love the things they defend' ... If all you are doing is marching around saving the place, what's the damn point?

...

Q: At the end of *Sleepy* the Dr goes and sits on a hill and it goes, 'This was the best bit of all his adventures, sitting on the ground afterwards' ...

KO: ... He sees the results of this heroism and that's his reward. And that's what it is - it's a reward. He sees that he has saved tea and cricket for another day. That is a very frockish thing - that what is important is muffins. Or going to the hop. Because it's not, 'I have fulfilled my great cosmic destiny I'm now king of the what-have-yous'.

Q: That brings me back to thinking about what you can do in this very generic adventure serial format. I'm fascinated that in so many of your books you think about what happens to the companions when the Doctor has gone, when they're left behind. It happens to [seventh Doctors TV and Virgin book's companion] Ace, it happens to [Eighth Doctor BBC books companion] Sam twice in *Seeing I* and in *Unnatural History* - the lives that you live when you're not saving the universe. And there's always an incredible sense of loss there - that the lives aren't meaningful. You paint these quite grey pictures of working in a video shop and just watching videos and getting stoned and that's all there is. And this sense that it's not quite good enough. Ace going to parties in [ancient] Egypt [when she gets lost in time in the book *Set Piece*] - it's not quite good enough and this incredible sense of loss about the meaningful universe-saving. But [in the books] that then always ends up with a translation of that impulse into a kind of much more everyday

realistic guide for how to make the world a better place. OK, so you can't save planets, but you could go work in a homeless shelter. The Doctor takes a week off to go to a hospice, Ace ends up fighting for what she believes in - that's almost like a translation of the great ideals back into the messy banality of everyday life.

KO: Maybe that's an effort to connect the gigantic, cosmic genre stuff back into the real world. I love the bit where the Doctor works in a hospice ... because it's such a tiny tender thing to do. And it's almost like paying his dues: it's like 'I get to go off and have these great cosmic adventures but I have to do this to kind of pay for it'. Not in a punitive sense, but in a kind of, 'This is my toll. This is my fare'.

Q: To remind him that that's what he's doing. And yet even there, you keep the ambivalence open because you have Roz criticizing him for doing that. She says, 'You're being tokenistic' ...

KO: ... But I mean it's a problem for the Doctor. A perpetual question is why doesn't he go back in time and stop Auschwitz? I've had to think hard about that question because as soon as you start getting him involved in history you think, well, isn't it an incredible dereliction of duty, and positively evil, not to go back in time and stop dreadful things from happening? ... There's a line in [1976 fourth Doctor Tom Baker TV story] *Seeds of Doom* where he won't amputate the guy's arm [when a member of an isolated Antarctic team is infected with an alien virus]. He makes the [team] zoologist do it. The zoologist isn't qualified to do that, but he can probably manage it. And they're like, 'You have to do it, you're a doctor'. And he says, 'You must help yourselves'. And I thought, there's an example of cracking moral decision: I am not going to solve all your problems for you. Cutting off some guy's arm is not a Doctor-size problem. OK, saving the world from a giant plant, that's my bag, that's my responsibility. But I'm not cutting this guy's arm off! You know, you're just going to have to do it yourselves. And I think that that is probably the answer. Somewhere, along the line, the Doctor has made this hard decision about the human race - you have to help yourselves. Now if the Krynoids invade you, I'll save you, fine, because you can't save yourselves. But everything else, your own history ... and you can see how easily he could turn into this benevolent dictator, if he tried to get everything on earth absolutely right. And any activist will have had fantasies about

being king of the world and how they would organize it. And then you start to think, ‘I don’t trust anybody else with that kind of power ... why would I trust myself with it?’

...

Q: I was saying before that I loved the novels because it was a very optimistic universe, where you could be a humanist and everything would turn out OK in the end. But does that only work in a fictional universe?

KO: You’ve got an advantage in a novel in that you don’t have to show that ten thousand year point of view ... In *the Year of Intelligent Tigers I*, not entirely intentionally, created a socialist utopia. And all the musicians lived there and everybody has the dole and everything’s wonderful and fabulous. And it’s bullshit. I hadn’t thought it through at all - I’ve just sort of thrown it in as the background. And I’m dying to go back and write the sequel where we find out that the musicians and the farmers had a huge war over supply and demand and they’ve had to alter their money system and all this stuff’s happened. So I want to go back in a hundred years or something... and not just [say], ‘And they lived happily ever after’ ... I think that would be quite a valuable exercise but I’m not sure that within a novel you can do it. Unless you’re willing to actually set part of your novel ten thousand years later, which is very awkward in terms of storytelling. So you’re a little bit stuck with a happy ending, or an ambiguous ending. It’s harder to say, ‘Look, the universe isn’t this simple, I know it looks like the good guys have won, but much more difficult times are ahead’ ... I guess you can gesture to that but you can’t deal with it in any depth. That’s something to keep in mind as we have all our grandchildren playing on the grass, but boy, are they going to have some trouble when they grow up.

Q: Paul Magrs and Paul Cornell [authors of Virgin *Doctor Who* novels] have written outside of the *Doctor Who* genre, science fiction, and with Magrs, the literary novels ... It’s very clear that within our cultural value systems, literary non-genre novels, whatever the quality, are still regarded as superior, next comes genre [fiction], and underneath that comes your TV tie-ins.... One of the ... things that is wrong with TV tie-in novels, from the point of view of traditional cultural values, is the fact that it’s a collaborative process. Even if you’re not writing a co-authored novel, the ideas, the settings, the framework have been developed by hundreds of other authors, and you’re contributing to that. Now

for traditional literary theory, that's a sign of absolute abjection. Because there's a fetishization of the individual in literary writing. But it seems to me that kind of collaborative work actually has a lot going for it. And I can see that particularly again in the golden age of the Virgin books that you and Ben and Paul and Andrew were having a conversation with each other over the course of the books ...

KO: ... Ben wrote the *The Also People* because he read *Set Piece* and he thought, 'I have to finish Kadiatu's story' ... Paul [came] up with Death as this kind of goddess and then I used her in my stuff ... It's sort of like passing the baton around where we keep being inspired by each other ...

Q: [And that] challenges the traditional view of culture: that you've got the speaker, the author, the creator - who is active - and then the consumer who is somehow just passive and somehow just takes the ideas from them

KO: Anybody who thinks that hasn't been on the Internet.

Q: I like the fact that there's a conversational aspect of a number of authors working on the same project, where it's obvious that you are the consumer *and* the producer - that you've taken the ideas from someone else and then you pass them on. You work on them, you develop them, and then other writers consume them. The roles become much more complex ... Just thinking about your active consumption of *Doctor Who*: we consume texts, we read them, we watch them - and we remake them in our heads, we pick out the bits that interest us, we interpret them in ways that make sense for us. And then some of us reproduce them in different forms - as you were doing with the novel form ... I was interested with your remaking of *Doctor Who*, you've remade the TV show in your novels in a number of ways. You've got rid of the casual sexism of [televised] *Doctor Who* - the idea that planets are inhabited entirely by men, which is a bizarre idea. You've got rid of the casual ethnocentrism of *Doctor Who* where 'abroad' is always where special events happen: so now, you pop into Sydney and go to Glebe and you're in a café, because why wouldn't you? You've got rid of the casual thoughtless violence. How much did you have to remake *Doctor Who* before it worked for you?

KO: What an interesting question. I mean some of it was so obvious. The reason I finally got around to writing a Peri novel [the sixth Doctor's television companion from

1984-1986, famously cast for her breasts, who appeared in her first story in a tiny bikini and spent the rest of her tenure in low cut tops] was that for a decade I'd been saying, 'I really want to write a Peri novel'. 'Oh what would your Peri novel be about Kate?'. 'Well, in my Peri novel she's going to wear sneakers and a sweat shirt and jeans'. 'Well what will it be about?' 'That's all I have so far'. So some of it's just like terribly obvious ... Sometime's it is so painful and embarrassing to go back and watch it. It's like watching old episodes of *The Goodies*. You loved this program and then they do some awful gay joke and you think, oh, Christ. But then you think, yes, that's right, its 1973, we'll forgive them this time. Then they do it again. It's a bit like reading the *Merchant of Venice* and you go, of course he's an anti-Semite, it's the 1600's, never mind. But then you get to do it yourself and you roll up your sleeves and you rub your hands.

...

Q: I'm interested in how culture changes - the very practical nuts and bolts of it. And one of the things that fascinates me is that you have this moment where a combination of an old British TV show and Richard Branson's moves into publishing [the *Doctor Who* tie-ins were originally published by Virgin Publishing as part of its attempt to break into the popular fiction market] comes together and you get this funnelling of people like Russell Davis - who goes on to do *Queer as Folk* which takes over the world [and is now producing a new series of *Doctor Who* for the BBC]. And Matt Jones who goes onto to script edit *Queer as Folk*. Paul Cornell, who does a lot of the television shows like *Wavelength* and so on [including stints scripting *Coronation Street*]. Even Steven Moffatt, who's in the short stories [and created award-winning British sitcom *Coupling*]. And Mark Gattis, *The League of Gentlemen* again, has taken over the world ... How did it happen that this one series of TV spin-off books was such a hub for so many people going through it? ... People who are now really creative and talented individuals were all inspired by this same television program. Is it something about *Doctor Who*? There isn't the sense that there's a *Space 1999* fan community that's produced this kind of thing - even *Star Trek*, I don't think, has produced the same kind of thing.

KO: No, it hasn't. I am not aware of many *Star Trek* book authors who have made the leap beyond *Star Trek* books... And certainly not anybody who's ended up being Russell

T Davis or Matt Jones or Mark Gattis. So in those people's cases I suspect that the *Who* stuff is part of their meteoric rise rather than the sole reason for it. And of course Moffatt as well was famous before he started to do any of the *Who* stuff. I think that's maybe because on the whole, if you pick up the *Star Trek* books - and this is a terrible generalization that isn't true of all of them - they're mostly pap and they're mostly conspicuous merchandise. And again that is not true of quite a few of the authors but it damn well is true of an awful lot of them. And that willingness to experiment and break the rules and to go forward isn't there. And that's probably partly due to cynical money-making and partly due to the fact that the show is still on television and it's difficult to progress without contradicting it, which is then going to not satisfy your readers. But the *Buffy* books manage to do this interestingly, they have their own little version of what happened in *Buffy*, with couples getting together and breaking up in the wrong order and this sort of thing, so they're I think a little bit braver about it ...

Q: It's particularly interesting as well that with people like Russell T Davies and Mark Gattis, it's not as though they used the *Who* fiction as a way to break in [to writing]. It wasn't a purely utilitarian thing. They're already successful, they're doing well - and then they go back to write the novels ... So there's obviously a sense there that they're not doing it for pure career reasons ... I don't know if it's just for the love of it, but also as a kind of, is it like, paying tribute? They're obviously inspired by it ... I'm just wondering whether *Doctor Who* has taught a whole generation of cultural creators how to tell a story? The program did adventure stories and what that is, is narrative ... Even when the characters were two dimensional, even when the violence was excessive, it could get you from A to B in an interesting way

KO: This is the reason I was able to write all those books without thinking about what the hell I was doing. I knew, in some deep structure of the brain, I knew that life comes in four episodes, and what happens approximately in each of those episodes. It had been programmed into me.... An awful lot of [fans] look at stuff and they can tell you when an ending is weak, even if they can't tell you technically what the damn problem is. They can say, 'That wasn't satisfying, it felt rushed'. And then you'll go back and see that the pacing is wrong, so you know technically what's wrong, where they know, out of a kind of intuition, why it isn't satisfying. That's really valuable. Because they will point you in

the direction where you can use your writerly skills or whatever to fix the problem. And I think people also know a bit about direction - because if you're reading *Doctor Who* magazine, directors talk about lighting and things. And you learn what a script editor is ... the knowledge has sunk in, how things were done. And people know what a camera script is, because they've read about them. They know a bit about what lighting is, and they might notice editing, as well as the narrative stuff. And whether you have a happy ending, or a downbeat ending, or an ambiguous ending. Where the explosion goes - people notice there's always an explosion, you know, they actually think, 'Gee that's an element of the story that's consistent'. I think it does partly come from watching it and watching it and watching it, and partly discussing it and reading about it. It has taught a lot of us stuff, even if we're not technically adept at describing what we mean. We still absorbed a great deal of knowledge about how to tell a story. I think you're absolutely right, that's exactly what's happened. I wouldn't be surprised if that's what's brought people back.