

Hub Magazine

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CONTENTS:

FICTION: *The Astronomer of Baghdad* by Matt Keefe

REVIEW: *Doctor Who - E-Space Trilogy box set*
Doctor Who - The Story of Martha
Godspeaker: Empress
Halting State
Star Wars: The Clone Wars Series 1 – Episode 8
The Kraken Wakes

FEATURE: *Van Gogh & The Burning Eye* by Simon Clark

The logo for Tolkien, featuring the name in a gold, serif font with a slight shadow effect, set against a dark, textured background.

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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

You'll see some changes around Hub in the next couple of months and thankfully, none of them are the 'Who is this Prime Minister of which you speak?' type. Instead, we're expanding our non fiction section to include some new voices and a new series of rotating regular features. Every week you'll find one of a series of new regular columns, covering everything from audio science fiction and tips on writing fiction to a monthly look at the best in genre cinema.

There's more to come as well but for now, I'll get out of the way and enjoy the issue.

Welcome to the Revolution. We have both punch **AND** pie.

REVIEWERS – PLEASE READ

A short while ago we suffered a minor technical breakdown, and one of our PCs became unusable. On it was our email database. We have better back-up systems in place now, but the problem resulted in our losing the names and email/snail mail addresses of our reviewers.

If you have reviewed for us, and wish to remain on the review rotation, please accept our apologies for not being in touch. Please also send your contact details to Lee at lee@therighthand.co.uk

We're ok for reviews for the next few weeks, but could do with building up a store, so get in touch and we'll tell you what freebies review material we can send...

FICTION

The Astronomer of Baghdad

by matt keefe



There lived in Baghdad, in the year 312, a great astronomer who returned home one day after evening prayers to find a stranger sat upon his floor.

'Masood!' said the stranger, for this was the astronomer's name. 'What fortune I have found you! Won't you help me?'

Yet the astronomer did not know this stranger at all.

'Who is this sat upon my floor?' he said.

'My name is Ghaali,' said the stranger. 'I am a friend.'

'A friend I do not recall,' said the astronomer.

'But a friend, I hope, you would welcome,' said the stranger, 'for I have much of which you will be grateful.'

And Masood at last remembered that he had forgotten his manners, and called for his servants to make ready food and drink. The astronomer showed his guest into a fine lounge, and here they feasted, for the stranger was both famished and weary and received it gratefully.

'So tell me, friend Ghaali,' said the astronomer, once his guest was sated, 'from where have you come?'

'From far away across the desert,' he said. 'An age it has taken me to get here.'

'And why have you come, my friend?' said the astronomer, for still he

did not know this man.

'I am in need of help, and I think there is no other who could give it. Only the greatest astronomer in the East – and so the world – could help me. You are he, are you not, friend Masood?'

And Masood surely was. It was to his house kings came in search of auspicious signs; to his house viziers to hear it decreed when a new year might begin; to his house holy men to know when times of fasting were to be marked ended or begun. In the court of the emperor of China, in the palaces of the kings of India, across the empire of the Persians and in the cities of the Greeks, Masood was thus known: the greatest astronomer in the East, and so the world.

'And how would I help you?' said Masood.

'I have found a great treasure,' said Ghaali. 'At least, I know where it is to be found.'

'Unless it is to be found upon the moon,' said Masood, 'I do not think an astronomer such as I can help you.'

'O, but my friend, it might as well be found upon the moon,' said the stranger, 'for I know not where else to look.'

'I am curious,' said Masood, 'to hear how you can not know where to look for a treasure you say you have already found.'

'I know of a great treasure, yes,' said Ghaali. 'But my only guide to finding it is the stars. I know the nature of this treasure, and I know how it is to be reached, but the spot where it lies, this I know only from the stars above.'

And so the stranger continued his tale and the astronomer delighted to hear it. A map of sorts the stranger had found, and along with it a great secret and the promise of much wealth. Out in the desert from where the stranger, Ghaali, himself had come there lay a palace, buried now beneath the sands and with it a dead king's treasures equal to those of any still living.

'And all this,' said the stranger, 'is to be ours, that we might find it.'

The stranger now showed his map to the astronomer, though in truth it was no more than a riddle, and yet to the astronomer it was plain at once. It was not only a riddle of the stars but of the planets also and described a place upon the Earth by the light of the stars that looked down upon it and by the ordering of the planets then in the heavens above it. This to the astronomer was guide enough.

'Come,' said Masood, and to his great study he led his guest. Here was all he needed to make clear that great riddle: his astrolabe and ephemerides, his orrery – or tellurion – his astrarium, globe and telescope.

Through the night the astronomer worked, with the stranger ever ready in assistance. This was always

the astronomer's habit, so much so that his friends feared for him, and often asked if he had ever yet seen the sun. 'He who studies the stars has the night-time for his library,' he would tell them and so in darkness he dwelt. Nor did the stranger seem to tire, until a little before sunrise, when he at last declared that he must depart.

'I must go,' said the stranger. 'I will return tonight. I will find you here again, yes?'

'Yes,' said Masood, 'After Isha'a. I will have my servants make supper ready.' And with this the stranger was gone; gone and off to morning prayers, or so the astronomer thought.

Masood did not sleep but soldiered on as relentless as the planets' own slow march across the heavens. All day he slaved at his enumerations; indeed, he did not eat until dusk came and the stranger returned, and the servants beckoned them both to supper.

'It is beyond me,' said the astronomer, 'I cannot fathom it.'

'I did not think it would be easy,' said the stranger. 'I have searched for this place long already, and with no luck.'

'But we have all we need,' said the astronomer. 'It is only that I am too slow and not wise enough. I have the set planets in their alignment, I have found the constellations in their proper degree, and yet these two I cannot bring to look down together upon the Earth. It is as if this place we seek is a palace buried on different sides of the world! Is this it, Ghaali? A palace that runs through the Earth's heart? Is this what we seek? Surely this would be the palace of the Shaitan himself.'

The stranger laughed, and the astronomer offered a humble smile, though his failure galled him wickedly.

'Do not forget,' said the stranger, 'that this riddle is an ancient one. It has been a thousand years since the stars looked down upon that place.'

'Of course!' said the astronomer. 'We must not mistake the heavens as they sit tonight for what they might have been then. I have it now!'

And the astronomer went at once to his study and by the many great apparatuses of his science he began to turn back time itself. Across the astronomer's mechanical universe, the centuries retreated; the sands of time blown from the face of the bronze Earth in his hands. After a thousand years blind, the planets were brought to look down upon that place once again. The stars crowded about to see them there, and so the astronomer found at last what he had searched for: one single, barren spot upon the Earth.

'I have it!' he said, as to the stranger he returned. 'We will go.'

'Oh, but there is no way,' said the stranger. 'It is many long leagues from here, is it not?'

'Yes, it is,' said the astronomer. 'Across the desert, as you thought.'

'I have always thought it would be so,' said the stranger. 'Then there is no way we might reach it. I have searched for this place so long now, my own wealth is gone. I have no camels, I have no men, I have no wealth. I thank you, friend Masood, but I must throw myself upon the mercy of another, the Sultan himself perhaps, to furnish me with these things. But I shall not forget you, friend Masood, you shall have a share greater than my own, I promise you, for surely you deserve it more than I, but it is not within my power to bring you that share with my own hands.'

The stranger rose from the table and made to leave on old, unsteady legs whose weakness the astronomer had not noticed before.

'Wait!' said Masood. 'I have camels. I have the wealth to buy men!'

'I could not ask any more from you, my friend,' said the stranger. 'I will beg the Sultan for help.'

'You do not ask, I offer it. Show me proof of this wealth and I offer it.'

'If you would trust my word,' said the stranger, returning once more to his couch, 'I would repay it with proof.'

'Then give me your word,' said Masood. 'I will trust it.'

'Then this will be our confidence, friend Masood,' said the stranger. 'Do not tell me the place you have found with your knowledge of the stars; do not tell it to me, so that you will know I cannot speak it to another. I ask only that you go there – though you will need twenty strong men at least, I think – and if you find there what I describe, you will take it as proof, and then we shall go on. Yes?'

'Yes,' said Masood.

'Then listen,' said the stranger. 'The place we seek is a great palace, though its roof fell in and its walls were destroyed. Its treasure lies beneath these ruins, as these ruins lie beneath the sand. This is how it has been described to me. Go to the place you have determined, and dig there. You will know at once if you are right, for a pavement of different-coloured marbles will appear to you not very far down. Dig no further, but you will at least then know there is truth in my words.'

'Very well,' said Masood, 'but won't you come with me?'

'To the very place? No,' said the stranger. 'The whereabouts of that place are to be your hold upon me, as a friend, until you have seen with your own eyes that there is truth in my words. You may let me know the last town at which you will call on your way, and I will wait for you there, but nothing more than this.'

'Very well,' said Masood. 'Call tomorrow, and I shall tell you.'

The stranger did not call. Masood had already made his preparations. He purchased two wagons, and sent one ahead in the hands of his servant, Qusayy, to hire men and to be ready for him to follow.

Masood waited for another day, but still the stranger did not call, and so he departed, alone and in the second wagon. With his servants, he left a letter for Ghaali.

Qusayy did not fail. Masood reached the desert town to find his servant waiting, with twenty men and two more wagons stocked with supplies for the journey. In this caravan they crossed the desert. For six days they travelled and when they halted Masood ordered his men to dig. They set up a great awning between the wagons to shade them from the desert sun, and they dug. The sand was fine and dry, and a steady breeze blew over the desert, so that even when half the men dug and the other half moved the sand from the hole's edge, they could manage little more than a foot in an hour. Still, they persevered and at noon they halted, for something hard blocked their way.

Masood stepped into the shallow hole, and upon his knees swept it clear of sand. A pavement of different coloured marble lay beneath him.

'Dig!' he said. 'Dig!'

Men crowded the pit and cleared the sand from the marble pavement. It was neither solid, nor fixed, but instead proved to be a great square of slabs, which the men hauled up with ropes and set on their ends at the edge of the pit. The marble slabs stood on columns, six feet high, and around them was room for men to stand. They cleared the slabs and down into this under-room they went. From his place upon the wagons, Masood could see a great corridor opening out before him, a colonnade of different kinds of stone and marble, lined with arches, and above the arches, niches with statues in bronze and gold.

The man at the end of the colonnade called for torches, and three were brought up from the wagons, lit, and handed down. Masood followed them down into the pit, though did not enter the colonnade where the men worked. Through the press of men he could see that they had discovered a doorway, covered by a bronze door which they drew away and set down on the floor, and beyond it a staircase. The leading man held his torch over the opening and turned to look back. His nervous eyes looked to Masood, who only nodded, and the man stepped slowly through the doorway. Other men followed. The flames of the torches flickered and dimmed as down they went.

A terrible scream went up from the staircase. Two enormous swords sprang out from the left and right, meeting at the point where the first man stood, slicing him to pieces. His body rolled to the bottom of the staircase, and when a piece of the corpse hit the ground a strange whistling cry went up, a ruby light shone out and with a puff of sand the marble steps one after another collapsed away, leaving only a slope as smooth and as slippery as the rocks beneath a waterfall. The labourers upon the staircase and around its opening, a dozen in all, slid to the bottom and could only shriek in terror as the earth closed in around them. To a man they perished.

All around Masood the other labourers shrieked and howled, though they were safe, and leapt from the pit. They ran to their wagons and in a great trembling mass fled back to town, without so much as a demand for their pay. Masood and Qusayy were left alone, Masood in the colonnade and Qusayy on its edge, above it, reaching down a hand.

'Oh my master,' said Qusayy, 'these are ruins of a most magnificent kind, yet to enter is forbidden, I think. We must pray to God for safety from the evil within.'

But Masood did not pray; he only sighed in terrible sorrow for what he had seen, and cursed himself when he wondered for a moment whether what really saddened him was to be denied such riches as he had briefly then glimpsed. He took Qusayy's hand and climbed from the pit. Two wagons remained, for there were not now enough men to use them, and with a heavy heart, Masood took to one, and Qusayy the other, as they set off back across the desert.

Four days later – for in fear they rode fast – they reached that little desert town once more. Masood found Ghaali already waiting in the little room Qusayy had arranged for them. When he had arrived there, Masood could not tell.

'I told you to dig no farther!' he said.

'I am sorry,' said Masood. 'I did not mean to betray you, my friend, only that I was so certain we had found the place, and I wished to waste no time.'

'You had found the place, and that is precisely why you should have stopped. It is not a place to be entered recklessly!'

'I know, Ghaali, I know,' said Masood. 'Is it ruined? Is it all undone?'

The stranger paced around the room.

'I do not think so. The place will right itself, I think, now that it is buried again. We may explore it once more, but it will be harder than before – and harder still to find men who will work there, no doubt,' said Ghaali.

'I will send Qusayy for workers at dawn. Perhaps word will not have spread so far by then.'

'Then perhaps we are lucky so many perished in the pit,' said Ghaali.

Masood could only look away.

'Still, now you know there is truth in my words, yes?' said Ghaali.

'I do, friend! I do!' said Masood.

'Then I will tell you all I know, so that the terrors in that place might be overcome.'

'Do not,' said Masood. 'I am tired, and there is no need. You may tell me when we begin to dig again. You may lead the way yourself.'

'No!' said Ghaali, with uncommon fury. 'You must listen; I cannot.'

'For why?' said Masood.

Ghaali turned and gazed from the window, looking out over the domed roofs of the desert town.

'I will tell you,' said Ghaali, 'but then my fate will be in your hands. May I trust you?'

'Oh yes,' said Masood. 'Trust me, for I have failed you once, and you may have no surer faith than in one who has seen his error and wishes to make amends.'

'Then listen,' said Ghaali. 'This is my tale. I have been to that palace you visited once before. I found it long ago, by accident, you might say, and just like you I witnessed that horror upon the steps. Eleven of my men were buried, one of them in pieces, just as you have seen today, but I fathomed the mystery, I dug again and I eluded those traps.'

'Then why haven't you the treasure already?' said Masood. 'And why have you sent me there if you knew where to find it already?'

'There are other traps, deeper within, ones I could not avoid,' said Ghaali. 'Not swords or falling staircases, but something far worse – curses. A curse by which I have been stuck!'

'A curse?' said Masood.

'Yes. A curse. I escaped that place alive, but cursed that I will die if ever I return, and cursed too that I could tell no man the place of that treasure. Instead, as you know, I could only lead you to it in the way I have done. I am sorry I did not tell you the truth before now, Masood, but my fate hangs upon it.'

'But then why would you lead me to it at all?' said Masood. 'You are free from your curse that you do not return; why meddle with it so?'

'This is not my only curse,' said Ghaali. 'For shame, I cannot tell you, but the horrors I face are great and they are many. I have spent my life since then outrunning them, though it has pained and killed many whom I have loved. But I have spent my life searching, also, and I have found a way by which my curse might be beaten.'

'There is a dead king within that ancient tomb, and it is he who has cursed me. If his tomb can be broken open, my curse will be lifted, my studies make me sure of it. This is why I have sought you out, Masood, for only you could find that place and do this for me. I do not care for the treasure.'

'Will you do this for me, Masood? Will you help me be rid of this curse?'

Masood pondered. What he had seen filled him with fear, what he had heard even more so, and yet he had seen enough to know that the treasures there to be found would be great, and more than this he felt already that he owed a debt of sorts to the courageous stranger.

'I will,' said Masood. 'I will return tomorrow, with more men who Qusayy will find for me, and I will do as you ask.'

Ghaali smiled.

'Do, do, and I will be forever grateful,' he said. 'But listen, you must do it in this way I describe, and this way only, for there are other traps and if you disturb them my curse will be eternal.'

'I will listen my friend, tell me.'

'Go to that place again, dig as you dug today. It will be a grim task to dig through those many corpses buried there, but it must be done. Pay your men well and they will not argue it; there will be riches enough to pay them anything they ask.'

'Dig farther, to the door you found today, but you must take care that your men clear the earth from it entirely. It is not enough to open only the doorway. Above it is a golden column. On top of the column there is a golden cock; his eyes are rubies worth more than all the spices in India. His feathers are emeralds and his claws hold two great diamonds.'

'You must not touch the cock; indeed, you must cover his eyes, so that he does not see. Only then may you pass through the bronze door. The stairway will be safe for you once the cock is blind. You may descend it.'

'Beyond this you will find another room of many columns, made of all kinds of marble and stone, and between them many great arches, and in these arches sit statues of bronze and gold, greater even than the ones you have already seen. You must touch not a single one of these statues. Pass them all and you will find a door of gold, like the door of bronze, except that an eagle and not a cock sits above it. You must cover his eyes also, and wrap a thong of leather around his beak. Only then may you pass through the gold door. Will you remember this?' said Ghaali.

'Yes, yes,' said Masood. 'Every word of it.'

'Then you may go on through the gold door. Beyond it you will find a room with walls painted in gold and silver, and within lies a tomb. Enter this room alone. Promise me that you will, for you have promised me once already that you would do as I ask, and you did not.'

'I will,' said Masood. 'I will enter that room alone, I promise. Let God see that I will.'

The stranger hissed, for clearly he thought this a grave matter indeed, but went on.

'Go at once to that tomb. Touch no other thing, but go only to that tomb. Break from it its lid, which you may only do with a stick of cypress; fashion one before you go. Take the lid from the tomb and set it down, and then it will be done and all the riches of that dead king will be ours. But you must do all these things only in the manner I have described, or I fear a curse will hang above us both.'

'I will do it in this very way, friend Ghaali, I swear that I will,' said Masood.

'Good,' said Ghaali. 'Then go, and soon my curse will be lifted, friend Masood.'

Ghaali departed and Masood allowed himself sleep, though arose at dawn to the sound of prayers. He added a prayer of his own to the wailing chorus.

Out to the street he went, where he found Qusayy ready with six wagons, and fifty men. They were desperate kinds all of them, pathetic wretches some, swarthy, vicious brutes the others, but they were all that would come, for word had spread already of the cursed place out in the desert.

In a great caravan, they set out.

It was six more days across the desert before again they reached that accursed place. Masood feared now that he was unwise, but he could not fail Ghaali. He had the men set up a great awning over the pit once more, though not even the upended slabs were visible there now. Hungry only for the gold Masood had promised them, the men began to dig. Through the bodies of those who had come before, bleached and withered as though their souls had been sucked from them, yet still so lifelike, they dug. A great heap of corpses they made beside the pit, beneath the glare of a desert sun so hot that not even the vultures dared brave it and those bodies lay as untouched as if they themselves were poison.

Once more the colonnade was revealed, though to clear it took an age – five long days to dig the sand from it and reveal the bronze door once more. All around it they dug, and the gold column Ghaali had described was revealed. Atop it sat a golden cock, with ruby eyes and emerald feathers, and Masood cast a black hood over it, blinding its eyes as Ghaali had told him.

Fear gripped him now, but Masood could allow no other man to go ahead of him for his soul would not withstand the shame and the guilt should harm befall them. Alone he descended the staircase, trembling in fear at every step. Every tap of his own feet he imagined the sound of some great blade unleashed from the stone and a knot of terrible fear burrowed and writhed in his stomach. He leant wearily against the stick of cypress he held in his hands; he could hardly breathe.

He found the gold door, just as Ghaali had described, and atop it sat an eagle made of gold. He drew the thong of leather out from his pocket and bound it tightly around the bird's beak, wrapping it three times about before casting a black hood over this statue too. He lifted the gold door from its place and set it against the wall. His eyes wet with the tears of a terrorising nausea he wished to submit to utterly, Masood passed through the golden door.

Within lay a room painted with gold and silver, just as Ghaali had described it. The tomb, however, was not at all as the astronomer might have expected. It stood upright in a craven fashion, twice the height of man, though carved in the exact likeness of one. It was bejewelled, and set with so much gold and silver that its value exceeded that of all the riches Masood had ever seen.

He dared not even touch it; he pushed the stick of cypress to it. He had carved one end into a flat, notched wedge and he slipped it between the lid and the marble of the tomb behind. A great gout of dust erupted from the lid as he pushed hard upon the stick of cypress. An inch separated the two halves, but he could move it no further and instead approached it from the other side, levering it just so in a dozen places around its edges. At last he felt its great weight shift, and Masood forced the stick between tomb and lid, pressing hard against it, sending the bejewelled thing of silver and gold crashing to the floor. Terror consumed him to hear that almighty, thunderous din; he was sure the whole world had that second begun to cave in upon him, but it wasn't so and but for the dust swirling around him and the echoes of the fallen lid, Masood stood in perfect, still silence.

He stepped in front of the tomb to look upon the ancient king whose resting place he had broken open. Fear greater than he had ever felt seized him at once. Before him, beaming though in slumber, lay the unmistakable face of the stranger, Ghaali!

There came to Baghdad, in the year 1424, a great explorer who awoke in his camp one night to find a stranger sat beside the fire.

'George!' said the stranger, for this was the explorer's name. 'What fortune I have found you! Won't you help me?'

Yet the explorer did not know this stranger at all.

'Who are you?' he said.

'My name is Masood,' said the stranger. 'I am a friend.'



Doctor Who - E-Space Trilogy box set

reviewed by scott harrison

(Featuring : Full Circle, State of Decay & Warriors' Gate)

Directed by Peter Grimwade, Peter Moffatt & Paul Joyce

Starring Tom Baker, Lalla Ward, Matthew Waterhouse, John Leeson

BBC

£29.99

I was only 8 years old when Tom Baker's final season as the Doctor originally aired between August 1980 and March 1981. The show had been running 18 years and I had been watching it by then for at least 5 years; it had quickly become my favourite show on TV along with *The Basil Brush Show* and *TISWAS*. It's hard to describe the scale of the impact that this show had on me. I could say that the hairs stood up on the back of my neck as the Marshmen arose from the swamp and emerged through the mist, or how the tears sprang to my eyes as the Doctor slipped from the radio-telescope and regenerated in front of his loyal group of companions (so, the Watcher was the Doctor all along!) or of the wriggly, excited feeling I used to get inside my tummy when I would settle down at the TV every Saturday teatime (or Monday and Tuesday evenings when Peter Davison took over)... but they are mere words that sound hollow in the typing. Still, for me Season 18 and later Season 19 (Davison's debut season) were the most important in the show's entire run up to that point... or at least the bit I'd seen at any rate!

The BBC's latest Classic *Doctor Who* DVD release, the *E-Space Trilogy*, marks the exact point where *Doctor Who* stopped being just a television programme and started being a major influence and driving force in my life. It was at this point that I realised I wanted to be a writer (and, indeed, went on to scribble many a *Doctor Who* story into the little blue exercise books that my Dad brought home from work for me – *The Dalek Invasion of Gallifrey* being the only story title I can recall now), I started to notice girls thanks, in no small part, to the gradual inclusion into the TARDIS of companions who were a lot younger and prettier than ever before – namely Nyssa, Tegan and, later, Peri – and I found my one and only childhood hero. Forget your James Bonds, your Steve McQueens and your Clint Eastwoods, they paled into insignificance next to the heroism, intelligence, wit and courage of a certain fella from Gallifrey!

It's a huge relief, then, that the 12 episodes in this box set more than live up to such lofty expectations.

Looking back now it's a wonder that *Doctor Who* survived the latter half of the Graham Williams era and the god-awful Season 17 in particular – without doubt the programme's lowest ever point. But survive it did and it's all thanks to a well timed reboot at the hands of new producer John Nathan-Turner and script editor Christopher H. Bidmead. This latest set contains the first three of the five stories that are arguably the 4th Doctor's best consecutive episodes since *Image of the Fendahl* marked the end of *Doctor Who*'s first Golden Age.

This loose-linking trilogy sees the TARDIS accidentally slip through a CVE (Charged Vacuum Emboliment) to become lost in E-Space, a small universe running alongside our own. In *Full Circle* the Doctor, Romana and K9 find themselves on the planet Alzarius where giant egg-hatching spiders, sinister reptilian marshmen and the crew of a marooned Starliner have a dark and sinister connection. This story is notable for not only introducing the character of Adric but being the first script to be written by a *Doctor Who* fan, and one who was only 18 years old at the time. Unbeknownst to the Doctor and co., Adric stows away aboard the TARDIS when in *State of Decay* it arrives on an unspecified primitive planet where a foreboding, gothic tower, home to the Three Who Rule, casts a fearful shadow over the inhabitants of a nearby village, and the Great Vampire, a hideous creature from Time Lord legends terrorises the land. As the trilogy reaches its conclusion in *Warriors' Gate* the TARDIS is hijacked by the time-sensitive creature Biroc, bringing it to the Gateway, a mysterious white void inside which stands an old, crumbling stone archway, and the TARDIS crew's best chance of finally escaping from E-Space. This final story was written by best-selling horror/supernatural novelist Stephen Gallagher and is perhaps the most complex, weird and ambitious story ever attempted by the programme and, largely due to maverick director Paul Joyce, is surprisingly successful. Harking back to the Philip Hinchcliffe/Robert Holmes era 3 years earlier each of the stories are heavily influenced by previous cinematic works. *Full Circle* owes much to the style and mood of the Universal films of the 30s, 40s and 50s, most notably *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, while the vampiric *State of Decay* borrows rather generously from the back catalogue of British filmmakers Hammer. More obscurely Gallagher's scripts for *Warriors' Gate* draws much of its influence from French filmmaker Jean Cocteau's films *La Belle et la Bête* and *Orphee*.

As with the previous box sets *The Beginning*, *New Beginnings* and *The Trial of a Time Lord* the various stories are linked together in what has recently become known as a 'story arc' and as a consequence all

the extras scattered across the 3 discs should be viewed collectively, with all making of featurettes being more or less part of one continuous documentary. Disc 1 (*Full Circle*) kicks the extras off rather badly with *All aboard the Starliner*, a making of doc that manages to tell us bugger all in its 25 min runtime other than Peter Grimwade was an intense director, it was Matthew Waterhouse's debut story and that *Full Circle* is the first in a loose trilogy. Let's face it, the second and third 'facts' are bleeding obvious and anyone who owns a copy of *Earthshock*, *Time-Flight* or *More Than 30 Years in the TARDIS* will have heard the first one time and time again! Unfortunately things go downhill fast with the featurettes *K9 in E-Space* whose only plus-point is that it's mercifully brief and *E-Space – Fact or Fiction?* which at least is interesting but feels like it should be shown at 4am on BBC2s Learning Zone and contains only the most tenuous links to the stories in this box set. Things do improve greatly, however, as we flip over to disc 2 which not only contains the best story of the trilogy (*State of Decay*) but also boasts the best of the extras. *The Vampire Lovers'* making-of documentary does at least attempt to get to the nitty gritty of behind the scenes Who and even touches upon Tom Baker's increasing 'difficult' nature and his volatile relationship with his soon-to-be wife Lalla Ward. The centerpiece of the disc, and indeed the whole set, is the wonderful *Leaves of Blood* documentary which not only examines vampires in literature from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* novel up to Stephen King's '*Salem's Lot* and Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* but features contributions and opinions from some of Britain's most talented and important genre authors such as Simon Clarke, Ramsey Campbell, Stephen Gallagher and Kim Newman. At only 20 minutes it is woefully short but manages to pack in more information and interest than all the other featurettes put together. Over on disc 3 *The Dreaming* is by the far the best behind the scenes documentary of the entire set as it delves into the troubled production of *Warriors' Gate*, which had writer Stephen Gallagher, script editor Christopher H. Bidmead and director Paul Joyce falling out as Gallagher's extremely detailed novel-like script was rather drastically rewritten by both Bidmead and Joyce, and ended with Joyce's dramatic sacking from the project half-way through filming before eventually being rehired. As with the previously mentioned documentary, it's only downfall is it's 30 minute runtime which passes by annoyingly swiftly.

As is usual with Classic Who releases the commentaries are where the money can be found, with actors, writers, script editors and directors all brought together to provide the listener with all the facts, gossip and anecdotes that are sadly lacking in the documentaries. Unfortunately there is a distinct lack of Tom Baker amongst the proceedings which is odd considering that this is his final season - and arguably one of his most important - but the inclusion of writer Terrance Dicks, script editor Bidmead and the elusive *Full Circle* writer Andrew Smith does much to ensure that Baker's absence never casts a shadow over our enjoyment.

Although the box set is liberally sprinkled with character retrospectives, deleted scenes, film trims and *Swap Shop* clips, it all sadly feels somewhat incomplete. What this release is screaming out for is an extensive documentary exploring the dramatic revamping, restructuring and reinventing the programme had undergone less than two months early at the hands of new producer JNT and script editor Bidmead. Unfortunately it looks like *The Leisure Hive's* disappointingly brief and forgettable featurette *A New Beginning* released on DVD in 2004 is all they can offer us in that regard and with all of Season 18's stories now available bar *Meglos* it appears highly unlikely that we're going to get one. Although, having said that, the boys in the restoration team need to come up with something spectacular on the extras front to counterbalance the rather weak and flabby *Meglos* when it's finally released. So, how about that in-depth doc then lads?

Sadly, perhaps this release's greatest strength (aside from it containing 12 episodes of some of the best *Doctor Who* you'll ever see, which really should be it's greatest strength) is that it's a set of three 4th *Doctor* stories, thus guaranteeing it to be bought by old-school *Who* fans, *New Who* fans, casual fans and non-fans alike (my fiancée, also a lifelong *Who* fan, calls this 'Hinchcliffe Syndrome'; the automatic reaction of a non-fan or *New Who* fan to proclaim Tom Baker as their favourite Doctor [or second favourite if a *New Who* fan!] and dismissing everything after *Logopolis* as rubbish and/or lightweight).

This box set presents us with three classic stories that finally sees the character of the 4th Doctor restored back to his original factory settings, after 2 and a half years of Baker playing the Time Lord as an ineffectual, over-the-top court jester that had become a woeful and tiring parody. It's true that the extras tend to swing from the marvellously informative to the bafflingly redundant, but there's plenty of them spread out over the 3 discs and they should keep you occupied for a good 3 or 4 hours. Along with 2007's *New Beginnings* box set these are the best 4th Doctor releases to hit our DVD shelves so far.

Doctor Who - The Story of Martha

reviewed by alasdair stuart

Written by Dan Abnett, David Roden, Steve Lockley & Paul Lewis, Robert Shearman and Simon Jowett
BBC Books
£6.99

The year that never was, and the awful things Martha Jones endured during it are arguably the relaunched Doctor Who's only open wound. Martha remains, for some, a character broken at source, a young woman whose greatest act, whose heroism is never witnessed, only talked about. Until now.

Sitting somewhere between an anthology and a novel, the book begins and ends at the same place, with Martha wading ashore after a year overseas and meeting Tom Milligan for the first time. In between, Abnett tells the story of her initial escape from England, her journey through France, her encounter with a Brigadier of sorts and finally explains why the Master burnt the Japanese Islands. He also gives us a welcome and remarkably plausible insight into the mechanics of the Master's takeover, painting his reign as equal parts Brazil and Black Hawk Down. The special forces operatives Martha spends a year on the run from are intimidating but it's the bureaucrats they work for, with the feline, mercurial and sociopathic Master at their head who are truly frightening.

Abnett is one of those authors who makes it look easy, and his work here is typically impressive. His Martha is convincingly the woman we've seen before, but at the same time there's more depth to her and a grim resolve that fleshes the character out very effectively. Abnett lets us see her change from the bright, optimistic companion to the smart, slightly grim, tired woman who wades to shore a year after leaving England. His work is continually impressive, in places deeply moving and absolutely in keeping with, as well as expanding on, the character we've already met.

Nested within Abnett's story are a series of short stories by other authors, which, in a very clever touch, are also the stories Martha tells as she crosses the world. Roden's 'The Weeping' provides a great backdrop to a story about the Doctor's pathological compassion whilst Jowett's 'Star Crossed' is slightly less effective but is raised impressively by a couple of inventive twists on the traditional 'Stranded colony ship' idea.

Lockley & Lewis' 'Breathing Space' is the only near future piece on display and has a premise that could have easily been expanded to cover a full novel. The Doctor and Martha arrive on a space station above Earth and discover that first contact has been made with the Benefactors, a benevolent and distant race who have offered to repair all the damage done to the environment over the centuries. There is, of course, a catch and the way the Doctor and Martha go about discovering it, mixed with the beautiful but deadly organic technology on display marks this out as one of the best stories in the book, fast paced, entertaining and witty.

It's 'The Frozen Wastes', Robert Shearman's entry, that emerges as the highlight of the book. A story that combines the difference between the dreams of children and adults, exactly how alien the Doctor is and a doomed hot air balloon expedition to the North Pole it's a piece which is by turns horrific and compassionate, an unflinching character study that manages to celebrate the spirit of adventure that lies at the heart of the show and the Doctor himself. Without this story, the book would be excellent. With it, it borders on exceptional.

'The Story of Martha' does everything it needs to, giving an extra dimension to the character, exploring the Year that Never Was and telling not one but five distinct and complimentary stories. It's Doctor Who at its best and no fan should be without it.

Godspeaker: Empress

reviewed by cathy hill

Written by Karen Miller
Orbit
£7.99

The book starts with an unwanted, unnamed she-brat born in a savage and arid country. When she is sold to slavers she names herself Hekat and looks forward to a change from the brutality and neglect of her early life. As her owner pampers her and teaches her about the wider world, Hekat grows to love him

because he's the first person to show her affection. However once they reach the civilised city of Et-Raklion Hekat discovers that she is just a valuable commodity. She escapes before she can be permanently marked as a slave and sets out to forge her own destiny. Chosen as an instrument of the feared, nameless god Hekat is filled with purpose and confidence. Rising far above her lowly beginning Hekat is driven always by her confident faith and her forceful personality.

If your enjoyment of a book depends on liking the main character this may not be the book for you. Hekat is ruthless, uncompromising and determined. She is totally committed to her godly mission and her supreme confidence makes her impatient and intolerant of other people and what she perceives as their flaws. Her dreadful upbringing and subsequent experiences mean that she is understandably hard and mistrustful; it would be unrealistic for her to be nice or kind early on. However even after she is shown love, trust and affection Hekat cares very little for other people seeing them primarily as burdens and obstacles. She doesn't care about the man who loves her and is barely tolerant of her main friend and ally. The only person she feels any real love for is her son and she often treats him harshly to toughen him up. You start wanting bad things to happen to her long before anyone even tries to set themselves against her.

Although the main character isn't likeable the book itself is well written. The other characters are far easier to like because most of them are nicer and more sympathetic. Hekat alone would make the book unbearable, however the other viewpoint characters are far more understandable people. They suffer from self doubt and uncertainty which is a refreshing change from Hekat's unrelenting self-confidence and irritating sense of superiority. The only problem they have is blindness to just how manipulative and uncaring Hekat really is.

The land of Mijak is a consistent and detailed setting meaning that the characters occupy a realistic world. The society is dominated by the worship of the god; this strong social structure unites the seven hostile regions of the country. Every settlement has a godpost and the harsh religious laws are upheld by godspeakers who take offerings, perform sacrifices and punish sinners. The god is the main fantasy element in the book; Karen Miller has created a setting where a god is feared because it is a real, demonstrable force in the world. Godspeakers have many artefacts that work like magic amulets and they are feared because of their supernatural methods.

The plot widens in scope throughout the book, starting with the very narrow experience of a neglected and uneducated young girl it grows into a story of war and exploration that spreads beyond the map provided at the front of the book. The introduction of more characters and plotlines leads to an increase in conflict and tension that draws the reader in. Personal relationships and national politics become linked and strong religious beliefs and traditions are questioned.

However there are some issues with pacing, especially in the final third. The plot speeds up dramatically as it gets closer to the end of the book meaning that years, and even decades, are skipped over between chapters. As new chapters are not started on new pages this means you can have a twelve year gap in only a few lines of text. These sudden and unexpected changes can be disorientating and require blocks of exposition to catch up on the action the reader has missed. The characters, events and places introduced towards the end feel much flatter and less important than those in the rest of the book because they are given less room to develop. It's as though the author has become impatient with the events that must happen in order to set up the sequel and is just racing towards the end. I wonder if it wouldn't have been better to end the book sooner, it certainly feels like it's coming to an end several times before it does, leaving the actual ending feeling like an add-on.

For those who don't mind the unsympathetic main character this is a fairly enjoyable story set in a world that distinguishes itself from the common types of fantasy setting. It has a flavour of the east about it and although it is a low technology, vaguely feudal world, it has a gritty, bleak quality that wouldn't feel out of place in urban fantasy. The story never slows down and keeps you reading, even if by the end it feels like a set-up for the next book.

Halting State

reviewed by david gullen

Written by Charles Stross
Orbit
£7.99

Jack Reed is a geek, a loner, an overweight computer gamer and possessed of a set of near-unique software skills. He's also unemployed, drunk, and in a police cell in Amsterdam. So when he's head-hunted for a short-term contract he's not that bothered about, and at an outrageous day rate, he feels like he's landed on his feet for once. But this time he's not only working for auditors instead of a software house, he's also unwittingly involved in a global hi-tech conspiracy that threatens the economic survival of a newly-independent Scotland, a European Union that is about to absorb Russia, and the stability of the

current world order.

Relentless, intense, witty and well-observed, *Halting State* is a fast-paced geek-procedural detective story where everyone is playing catch-up with the hi-tech hostiles and nothing, not even a piss-up in Amsterdam, is what it seems.

Starting with an impossible raid on an unbreakable bank in gaming cyber-space, Charles Stross's clever and entertaining story of the near future is an extrapolation of current trends in society, economics and power politics seen from the point of view of ordinary people. Software engineers, police, auditors and gamers are all relentlessly pulled into an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous conspiracy of deceit and double-dealing as the country spirals towards the nearest thing to open war you can get without actually firing any guns.

It's an affectionate book too, Stross seems fond of most of his characters, they're normal, they have strengths and failings, and hopes and fears made worse by the increasing paranoia unfolding around them. Unlike many fantasy authors, Stross doesn't dwell on this to excess, he lets the character's actions inform us of their nature, and vice-versa, and then moves on with the narrative.

The style is intense, the pace seldom lets up, but there are quieter moments for the reader and the characters – time even for some nicely done moments of romance as Jack falls for Elaine, a slightly-built auditor with a neat side-line LARP and sword-fighting.

The background is detailed and comprehensive, this is a near future world we probably won't end up in, but it's a highly plausible one, where the EU, China and India are ascendant. The USA is struggling, held back by its now primitive infrastructure just as Britain, the vanguard of a previous technological revolution, once was.

Just when you're starting to wonder where this is all going, that the story so far is just too small, it kicks into a higher, nastier gear with good timing. Death threats against Jack's niece, an attempt on his own life, and an occasional corpse turn up, and yet again what is on the surface merely serves to conceal the truth beneath.

With traditional fantasy it's conventional to have a map, and sometimes a cast of characters. Set in a Glasgow and Edinburgh that Stross makes at once familiar and different, with driverless taxis and VR glasses showing a dozen overlays on reality, we don't need either of those. There were times though when I thought a glossary for all the TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms) FLAs (Four etc) that fill techno, police, and business babble would be useful for those of us not as (un)fortunate as me to have almost as much familiarity with as Mr. Stross.

Because I am part-geek too, which made it a little easier, but don't let the TLAs put you off if you're not. This is a fun, savvy and entertaining book. Go read and enjoy. After all, if I was a complete geek I'd say that if the countries and corporations in the book were still running VMS, the only unhackable commercial operating system in the world, none of this would have been possible. But I like to think I'm not, so I didn't say that, did I?

Look into the red light.

<plam>

Star Wars: The Clone Wars Series 1 - Episode 8 - "Bombad Jedi"

reviewed by richard whittaker

Directed by Jesse Yeh

Written by Kevin Rubio, Henry Gilroy, Steven Melching

Starring: Ahmed Best, Anthony Daniels, Catherine Taber

Ah, half of you are going to hate this episode before they see it. Why? Because it's centered around Jar Jar Binks. Yup, the floppy-eared fool from the prequels, voiced by Ahmed Best, is back and the backlash will have kicked in before the lash. But get ready for the big surprise. It's funny. As in, laugh-out-loud funny.

There're some genuinely hilarious moments here, and that could be because George Lucas has got the original *Star Wars* fan film celebrity in to head up the script. Kevin Rubio is the man behind *Troops*, the pre-YouTube COPS pastiche set amongst stormtroopers, and his dry approach to the franchise he loves pays off big dividends.

But it's not just a comedy diversion. Binks and C-3P0 (Daniels) are accompanying Senator Amidala (Taber) to Rodia (home, fans will recall, of *A New Hope's* doomed bounty hunter Greedo), where she hopes to renew the planet's allegiance to the Republic. When negotiations undergo an epic fail, it's up to the sidekicks to save the day. What *The Clone Wars* does best, like the best of the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe, is fill in the gaps surrounding the movies. In this case, it's the political question of why planets would join the Separatists. Rodia is portrayed like a Latin American nation in the 1950s – looking to both the US and the USSR for help, and risking becoming little more than a cog in a bigger war machine. So while the comedy

pair cause havoc, Amidala finds out why an old friend would sign up with Separatist leader Nute Gunray. Before it gets too heavy, there are pratfalls. The comedy comes from bouncing Binks off the franchises other broad comedy creation, C-3PO. Ol' Goldenrod is used to being the shrill straight man to R2-D2, so it's odd to see the finicky droid as the despairing and almost resigned on-looker to Bink's constant calamities. But it brings back his core personality trait of being the franchise fall guy – this is, after all the droid that was made to suffer. Plus, giving Daniels some of his best lines since “I do believe they think I am some kind of god” in *Return of the Jedi* pays dividends.

The balance between the perennial victim and the eternal chaos attractor has a Loony Toons vibe. Rubio strikes high, low and subtle notes (exactly how the droid army ends up convinced that Binks is actually a Jedi is a tiny but delicious comedy of manners), but never tries to rewrite Jar Jar as more fan-friendly (if the fan is 45, that is.) Instead, by boosting his lucky incompetence, and showing that it defies all common sense but still pays off, he becomes satisfying for the older audiences that hate him and the younger fans that actually always liked him.

Unfortunately, while Rubio's script may be the tightest of the season so far, Yeh's direction is so-so. There's some surprisingly clumsy and awkward edits that see the action jump inexplicably mid-fight scene: that said, he takes some bold composition choices that really pay off. But by sticking to the old *Star Wars* mantra (“They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Naturally, they became heroes.”) Rubio's script makes this an exceptional episode. Really.

Next issue: The return of the Expanded Universe's most popular character: Sith assassin Asajj Ventris is back in Cloak of Darkness.

The Kraken Wakes

reviewed by alasdair stuart

Written by John Wyndham

Adapted by John Constable

Starring Jonathan Cake, Saira Todd, David Fleeshman, Russell Dixon, William Oxborrow and

Malcolm Hebden

BBC Audiobooks

£12.72

The world ends off stage in this superb adaptation of John Wyndham's least known and arguably best novel. It follows Mike and Phyllis Watson (Cake and Todd), two independent journalists who, on their honeymoon, witness a group of UFOs flying overhead. They file a report and think nothing of it until they discover that the UFOs have been sighted in their thousands, all over the world. Initially overlooked, Mike and Phyllis' work eventually leads them to a secret Royal Navy expedition, the discovery that the inhabitants of the UFOs may have meant to crash and the realization that mankind is losing a war it refuses to fight.

John Constable's adaptation is note perfect and sensibly brings Mike and Phyl to the same intellectual level, as well as exploring the slight unease at the heart of their relationship. Phyl is smart, driven and beautiful whilst Mike is a cynic sitting uncomfortably between angry young man and embittered old hack. The way they play off one another and the way that both Mike and Phyl use Phyl's feminine charms to get more information than they should is both a neat exploration of the change in gender politics between the '50s and '60s and an awful lot of fun. Cake and Todd are on tremendous form here and the easy, bantering back and forth between the two is easily the strongest point of the entire production. Excellent support is provided by Fleeshman as their editor and Dixon as that most beloved of all b-movie characters, the scientist who knows the truth but no one listens to until it's far, far too late.

It's their work that brings the apocalypse into focus, gives a form to the faceless, nameless aliens that conquer the oceans and most of the world. The world may end just off stage but the effects are clearly on display. This is a story not only about the world ending, but about what happens next and in the midst of the very English apocalypse, the quiet collapse of society, there's some heroism, romance and most of all, hope. A classic adaptation of an overlooked classic, this is not to be missed.

FEATURES

VAN GOGH & THE BURNING EYE

by simon clark

Simon Clark on his latest novel, *THE MIDNIGHT MAN*

Sometimes the human eye catches fire. That is, every so often, we humans see the world differently. And this new world view sears us, it sets our spirit ablaze. Many historians would agree this happened in the region of two thousand years ago. The upsurge of new religions was nothing less than a pandemic.

Then it went and happened again around 1888. This was the year that Louis Le Prince shot the first ever moving pictures with his, 'Traffic Crossing Leeds Bridge.' Another inventor, William Frieze-Green, experimented with his 'Chronophotographic' movie camera. Meanwhile, Edison was busily developing the Kinetoscope.

It was as if humanity was saying, 'there's a new way of seeing the world.' Mental software had been reconfigured. But this 'feeling' wasn't subtle. It inflamed minds; it ravaged nerves, and drove some sensitive individuals into blazing insanity.

Vincent Van Gogh is a vibrant, towering, *Technicolor* example. Elsewhere, other minds withered before the fire of this new vision of reality. In Whitechapel, Jack the Ripper launched his killing spree in the summer of 1888. 'If thy eye offends thee, pluck it out...' but when Jack's eye was offended he took to plucking out entrails...

1888: virtually the entire human race grew agitated *in extremis*, because they'd been given a high-def view of their world (due to the advent of new media, a modicum of schooling, and maybe something else spiking the zeitgeist soup). This notion got its hooks in me. Eventually, a plot formed that would feature Van Gogh, the iconic artist, corroded by the searing intensity of his own vision.

Writing the novel became intensely addictive. Immersing myself in Dickens, and in Arthur Machen's amazing autobiographies, helped me produce rich, even pungent, descriptions of Victorian London -- not to mention a dash of the occult and forbidden lust.

Vincent Van Gogh is a compelling character to write about. For here's a sensitive man driven to distraction by dreams and nightmares. I introduced the idea that the terrible, lurid, monstrous things he saw weren't merely hallucination.

So, this is it: *THE MIDNIGHT MAN*: a story of murder, madness and ghosts. The central characters are fragile, damaged things. Van Gogh is driven to paint the visions that haunt him: *Knife blade, fingers, brush, he used all these to draw the figure from the cauldron of violet, black and searing yellow... a mysterious guest, who approached from down long corridors of time...*

THE MIDNIGHT MAN is published by Severn House. If you want to delve deeper here is the 'writing of blog' that also features a short film <http://midnightmannovel.blogspot.com/> Simon also features in a DVD extra on DOCTOR WHO: THE E-SPACE TRILOGY.

