



Doctor Who: Camera Obscura

Lloyd Rose

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The Doctor's second heart was taken from his body -- for his own good, he was told. Removed by his sometime ally, sometime rival, the mysterious time-traveller Sabbath. Now, as a new danger menaces reality, the Doctor finds himself working with Sabbath again. From a seance in Victorian London to a wild pursuit on Dartmoor, the Doctor and his companions work frantically to unravel the mystery of this latest threat to Time... Before Time itself unravels.

Doctor Who: Camera Obscura Details

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James Barnard says

If this had been a TV story, a New Adventures novel or a Big Finish play, it would be lauded as a classic Doctor Who tale. Unfortunately, it's a BBC Books novel; not only that, it's the one that kicked off a frequently frustrating "alternative universe" sequence which did little to help the range improve its profile.

That's a shame because it's one of the best Eighth Doctor Adventures the BBC ever gave us, and it's not until the end that the reader realises that things have not been as neatly tied up as everyone thought.

If I had to pick out the best thing about it, I'd say it was the setting. Doctor Who is always a good fit for Victorian England, and here we have a strong demonstration of why. From the early sequences which show the regulars at a séance, through scenes set in the theatre, various medical bases and remote Dartmoor, Lloyd Rose brings in the inherent prejudices of the era, and it's not just Anji Kapoor who feels slightly sidelined by the very narrow Victorian view of the way things should be. There's an ever-present air of menace in this, and it's not just from the external threats, or even from Sabbath who, finally, gets something interesting to do. The real 'animals', as always, are mankind and what we can be tempted to do to each other...

Remarkably, this is even better than Lloyd Rose's first Doctor Who book, which is no mean feat considering how good 'The City of the Dead' was. If there are faults, I can't find them.

My only regret is that the book's placing means most people won't even look for it, let alone read it. That really is a shame.

Adam Highway says

This is, by any estimation, the perfect 8th Doctor novel - possibly any Doctor. I've read it many times now, and it is on each reading as fresh, funny, sad, disturbing, prosaic, clever, witty, intelligent, descriptive, and just plain genius as ever before.

Read. This. Book.

Peter Camenzind says

<https://peterswhoreviews.wordpress.co...>

Basicallyrun says

In all honesty, any review of this would mainly be me flailing incoherently. I know I'm generous with my ratings, but this deserves every one of those stars. An interesting plot! Side characters I actually care about!

Fitz in period dress! Anji being a billion times more awesome than in The Domino Effect! Massive amounts of Doctor-angst! An overwhelming number of awful jokes about Sabbath's stealing the Doctor's heart! Weird pseudo-scientific magic! Cake! And enough downright brilliant lines to make me wish I was liveblogging it, a particular favourite being: *Probably it was the view of the brains that was getting him down.*

Michael Battaglia says

Okay, so maybe the first one wasn't a fluke.

I think pretty much everyone was surprised by how quite above decent Rose's first Who novel, "City of the Dead" was. Combining deft characterizations along with distinctive prose and a fine grasp of local detail, to me it sparked off the current run of quite excellent Eighth Doctor novels after a run of so-so books. Most people (me included) probably finished that book hoping that she would do another one, along with the simultaneous hope that it measured up to the high standards proposed by that other novel. I didn't even connect the two books at first (shows how much I pay attention) vaguely recognizing the name of the author but not expecting her to write another novel so close to the last one. It wasn't until a good chunk of the way through when I realized how much I was enjoying that that I checked which other books the author had written and finally made the connection.

She's a sneaky author, in a way, because she doesn't have the flashy brilliance of the Big Guns, your Lawrence Miles and Pauls Magrs or Cornell. The novels aren't obsessed with huge ideas or cracking open the potential of the setting and so don't immediately "wow" you with their audacity or by attempting to redefine everything you know about the character. What she does do right is have an impressive eye for details, an ability to make strangeness seem utterly normal while still conveying its own strangeness and a gift for dialogue that manages to be humorous with veering into sheer jokeyness and is capable of having people do more than shout cliches at each other. The crew of her TARDIS feel like people caught in a situation that they've accepted but aren't sure if they're used to and while I agree that Fitz and Anji aren't as essential as they've been in the past (more often than not either left out or coming along one step behind to yell at people for being left one step behind) we get plenty of scenes where its just the two of them talking to each other and its one of those rare times we get to see the friendship between them, an involuntary brother and sister where you first become friends with someone because they're the only person who can at all understand what you're going through and then actually become friends with them. Seeing them interact privately without the Doctor present lets them breathe on their own as characters and does more to ground them than most of the others books do.

Here, the situation is ostensibly that a time machine is operating in Victorian England improperly, which runs the risk of destroying the entire fabric of space and time every time someone uses it and is already doing weird things to people. There's a magician who can appear in more than one place at once, a woman with multiple personalities where some can see the future, an alienist with a crazy unseen brother, and a carnival barker bemoaning the loss of his greatest exhibit. But the time machine almost becomes a Macguffin as the true plot is the nature of the relationship between the Doctor and current foe Sabbath, and a good chunk of the plot takes a backseat while the two of them spar over ideas and philosophies.

Oddly enough, this is a good thing. One of the most maddening parts about Sabbath is how ill-defined he's been in previous appearances. Miles was able to get away with keeping him elliptically odd in his first appearance because the whole book was like that but now that we're forced to see him in more concrete settings, we need to know more about him and his motivations. Turns out he's in this time for both the same

and different reasons as the Doctor. Oh, and he has the Doctor's heart, having taken it several books ago to save the Doctor, he has managed to find his own use for it. Here he gets what amounts to center stage and the animosity between he and the Doctor often becomes electrifying. This Doctor is never better when he has a moral cause to draw his ire and in the presence of Sabbath his humor becomes sharper and more biting, the stakes get higher and he becomes that much more dangerous and clever. Framing their arguments to each other as a choice between saving lives and forming order, Rose does more to define this particular incarnation of the Doctor than a lot of other writers have, giving him a point of view and a philosophy beyond the guy who wanders in every week to save the day simply because it needs saving. Their conflict here manages to be both contained and threatens to spill out over into other books, but here I think we're going to see the definitive push-pull that all the other appearances will be based on.

What's remarkably this time is how much help Rose doesn't need from the setting. With the last novel, *New Orleans* did a lot of the work setting up the atmosphere and while Victorian England isn't a place we can visit to get the full effect, she does a good job of conveying the bits that lurk on the side, the asylums and the carnivals, and makes them places where the Doctor can fit in but still has to find his footing. She pushes the tone to the very edge of science-fiction, keeping all the time travel stuff intact (and bonus points for working in the Dalek time travel experiments with mirrors from "Evil of the Daleks" without bogging us down in almost forty year old continuity) but gradually edging the proceedings to a more fantastic approach, which seems to work better for this Doctor. "Doctor Who" in general, at least in novel form, seems to thrive the more we push it away from spaceships and into realms even the Doctor finds bizarre and get small helpings of that here, a visit to the presumed realms of the dead, layering on the concepts of extra-dimensions without bothering with the psuedo-scientific babble that comes along with it. It never moves into outright fantasy, which is fine, but there has to be room for stuff that science can't adequately explain in order to keep the universe a fascinating place. He moves in unknown hierarchies and oblique circles, and that sits just fine with me.

With all that, the climax of it comes almost as just another part of the proceedings, instead of building to a grand climax. The villain here never reaches the heights that the grand debate between the Doctor and Sabbath suggests it might be and it almost seems besides the point, a way of getting to the tragedy that resets the status quo slightly. Maybe there winds up being no real villains here, just people projected onto false walls and seeing what they want to see, desperate to capture the remnants of a bright day they barely recall but seems so close they can step right into it, never seeing the wall that lurks behind the picture. The Doctor is the person who stops you from walking into the wall, or gives you the handkerchief when you bust your nose against it. That feels right. Rose obviously can't write every novel in the series, but giving her more work certainly wouldn't be a bad idea.

Em says

Could not put it down.

I won't argue that the Doctor's repeated escapes from the actual character Death strained even Whoniverse credulity to the breaking point, but . . . it was just so cool that I have to forgive the lapse into Fantasy.

Sabbath was every inch the fantastic anti-hero he was destined to be. I'm so glad he finally got a chance for some attention. Seeing the Doctor get outfoxed is also wonderfully disturbing. Fitz and Anji had a very back-seat ride in this story, but I'll trade them for a look inside the Doctor's head any day. His clausterphobia is a great reference all the way back to Doctor Who: Seeing I. A+ for continuity.

If you love the Doctor, this one is a MUST READ.

Simon Curtis says

Another excellent book from Lloyd Rose. After City of the Dead, a hit rate of 2/2! Doctor Who done right in this format can be so very good.
