

A CHRISTMAS STORY

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2007 Christmas Special
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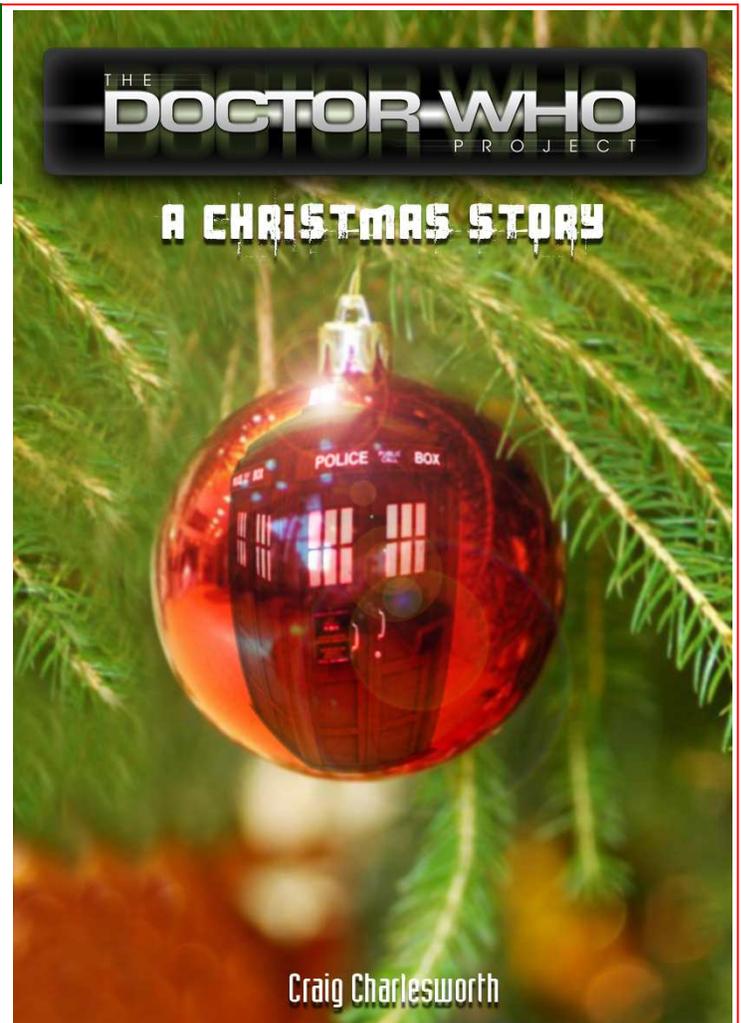
With festive greetings abounding and good will to all, Craig Charlesworth gives us a timely *TDWP* Christmas present in the shape of *A Christmas Story*, an adventure which sees the Doctor and Silver paying a Yuletide visit to Charles Dickens in 1842. Inevitably our heroes' benign intentions fail to immunise them against a fresh strain of alien menace, and in no time at all they are being chased from one time to another, and from early Victorian London to an alien vessel ominously circling the Earth.

The mystery of this seasonal slice of fiction hinges upon the arrival of a metallic, cricket ball-sized meteorite in rural England, presently snatched up by a wandering Dickens. Unbeknownst to the Victorian scribe his newly discovered treasure trove is a highly prized alien device, with a considerable bounty attached to its safe return. Unsurprisingly, the arrival of the Doctor and Silver coincides with the appearance of the first of three alien hunters in search of the missing device. In turn, each of these nasties is under orders from an alien recovery agency, headed by one Magnus Khan.

As the story gathers steam the Doctor and Silver, with some little help from a naturally bewildered Dickens, attempt to unravel the identity of the alien device whilst trying to avoid its deadly, single-minded seekers. Speaking of whom, a trio of spooky aliens, plaguing a befuddled Dickens, makes it quite plain that *A Christmas Story* liberally borrows from *A Christmas Carol* – and quite right too. This opening dip by *TDWP* into Christmas specials territory is precisely what the reader ordered, and Charlesworth's effort reflects an author who clearly enjoyed writing this winter's tale. More, by deliberately setting his narrative a year before Ebenezer Scrooge and his ghostly visitors were given literary life, Charlesworth provides us with an intriguing answer as to what inspired Dickens to compose his festive masterpiece.

A well chosen – and well used – literary link is one excellent ingredient; consistent pace with a sprinkling of variety is another. The chase between the time travellers and the alien hunters delivers the former, whilst the occasional finely tuned diversion provides us with the latter. One such diversion involves a particularly well written insight into the arboreal ponderings of a splendid oak tree which, it must be said, presents a rare opening scene amongst *TDWP* adventures. Khan's Tele-Ship is another nice addition, and its telepath navigator has shades of Stephen Gallagher's time-sensitive Tharils in the classic series story *Warriors' Gate*. Diverting diversions aside, things are kept moving along by the first-rate chase sequence that fuels the bulk of the adventure, and which sees the Doctor, Silver and Dickens inadvertently escaping into the Victorian's personal past – and another salute to his future Christmas story. In amongst which the Doctor's crafty use of a fire bucket to extinguish a particularly flammable foe is pure *Who*.

Good characterisation is evident throughout. Both the Doctor and Silver are well drawn, and sufficient substance is given to Dickens to raise him above the status of a mere celebrity guest character. Khan, the apparent villain of the piece, makes for a fine ship-bound manipulator, and his one-by-one deployment of his three stooges is wonderfully typical of the evil mastermind at work. Furthermore, it is to Charlesworth's credit that he takes the time to create an enjoyable set of minor figures, in a series of keenly focused snapshot scenes. One such example is the hotelier, Alfred Humbert, whose clumsy hospitality is engagingly brought to life in the space of just a



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few words. The briefly sketched Tele-Ship navigator, Serendipity Brown, is also a fine peripheral character, lent a unique edge by dint of the single red rose which is used to influence her guidance skills. And if that isn't enough for you, the conversation between the Doctor and Silver, over the type of sonic screwdriver the Time Lord would like to get his hands on, is inch perfect.

Beyond all these admirable parts there is one further piece which is pivotal to a good Christmas tale, and that is the seasonal atmosphere evoked by the reading of it. Without a doubt *A Christmas Story* weaves the quintessential Yuletide stuff by the yard, making for an excellent evening's reading, preferably by a roaring fireside on the night before Christmas. And the final twist, in which the purpose of the much sought after alien device is at last revealed, is a nice touch which leaves the adventure on a positive note.

Rating: 9/10