

JOURNEY'S END

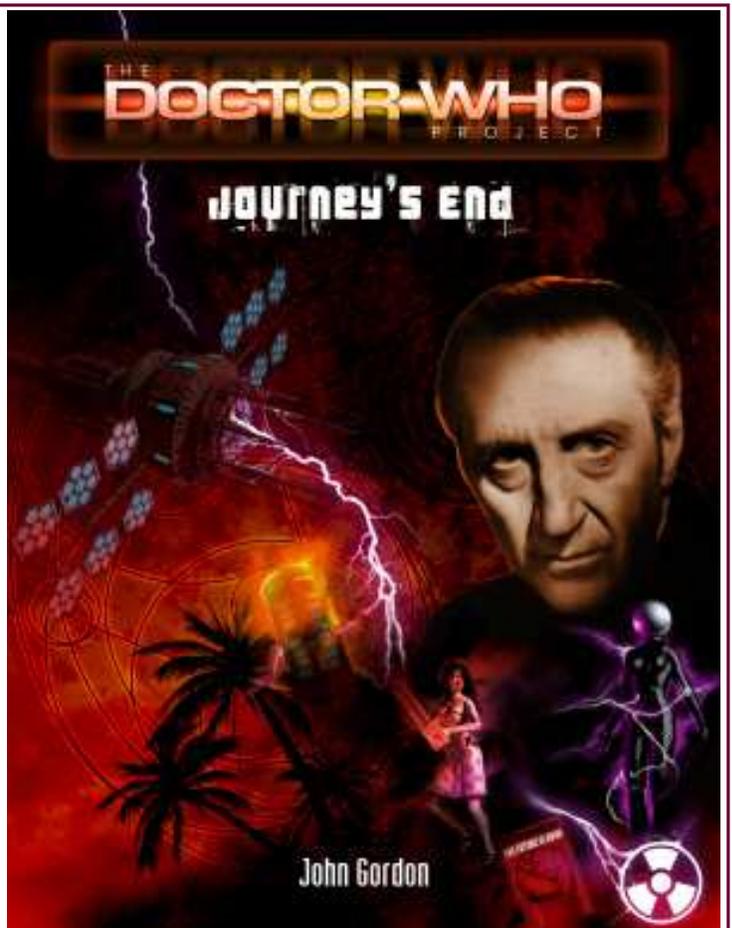
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Season 35 ▪ Story 10U
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To date John Gordon has a brace of season openers to his name (Season 33's *Dawn of Time* and Season 34's *New Beginning*). Now, with the launch of *Journey's End* he has notched up a brace of season finales (the first being Season 34's *Cradle of Death*). This keenly anticipated tale sees the Doctor facing what is potentially his final adventure as a time traveller – a prospect which scarcely bears thinking about.

After a shadowy prologue the story begins with a tightly scripted tour of some of the characters and places which fill its pages: Commander Channing taking up his post aboard the nuclear-powered SS *Spearhead*; the Commonwealth Commissioner Sir Henry White and his faithful secretary Carol Merriweather, facing the ebbing away of colonial privilege; and the psychopathic Police Chief Pierre-Jacques Toussaint, a man intent upon maintaining his squalid little empire at any cost.

This who's who of characters is smartly followed by the Doctor and Silver engaged in a light-hearted conversation over their next destination. Such moments are rare in *Doctor Who*, and all too soon their plans are brutally shattered by an apparently freak occurrence – a Null-Time event – which leaves the Doctor, Silver and Mortimer TARDIS-less and stranded upon a small Caribbean island in 1963. The time traveller's unexpected arrival coincides with the imminent testing of an all new atomic submarine, and the socialist stirrings of a populace tired of colonial rule and local corruption. Mix in the fact that the Cuban Missile Crisis has barely left the news headlines – and the assassination of President J. F. Kennedy is just hours away – and you have the makings of an exceptional piece of story telling. More, if all these threads weren't enough we soon discover that the Null-Time event is anything but a freak occurrence, and that its "trumpet blast" is the perfect cover for a far more devious scheme, one which has the fingerprints of a certain time-faring race plastered all over it. Indeed, Gordon chooses the strands of his plot line with a surety of touch that is guaranteed to leave the reader's curiosity at breaking point.

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time. For the Time Agents this has meant being trapped on Earth for no little time, whilst for the better shielded TARDIS crew the time lag is a mere twenty-four hours. This means that the Doctor and Silver have the best part of a day to work out what's happened and to stop it happening again, in typically paradoxical fashion.

As things develop we find an increasingly volatile Caribbean island, Petit Cerique, caught up in a maelstrom of happenings which threaten to sink it. Still further, the testing of the nuclear-powered submarine just so happens to coincide with the Null-Time event – a synchronicity of incidents which is simply too perfect to be the work of chance. As the narrative spirals towards its gripping climax shadows of the Doctor's past, and ever darker dealings on Gallifrey, conspire to bring about a stunning

conclusion which leaves yet more questions to be answered.

Structure-wise *Journey's End* is divided up into a series of time-based segments (e.g. i. Dawn, ii Morning, etc.) spanning a single day. In between these segments there appear tantalising interludes which attend to matters on Gallifrey. These mini episodes portend of more than just another run-of-the-mill puzzle for the Doctor to solve, and as such the Null-Time event takes on a considerably more serious meaning.

Like some of his earlier works Gordon weaves a layered affair which tackles a variety of events and characters. Crucially, this intricate web is shrewdly managed so as to present a feast which intrigues the reader at every turn. Take, for example, the cat motif. It is clear that this insertion is no mere whimsy, and when the identity of the skulking felines is finally revealed it is with a flourish which sets the reader's mind racing.

Gordon's grip on the Ninth Doctor and Silver is quite possibly the best of any of TDWP's team of writers. He simply has the knack of rolling out dialogues that fit their respective characters, and the chemistry between them, like the proverbial glove. This quality of writing reaches its apex when Silver must decide whether to give the Doctor the chance to make the ultimate decision – a decision which would virtually guarantee her losing him. To say that this twist in the tale produces a heartrending result is a colossal understatement.

But Gordon doesn't just bring the regulars to life. Each of the guest players, whether they be big or small, is sketched out with a skill that marks out his writing prowess in capital letters. White and Merriweather are the

typical bureaucrats of a dying empire, whilst Toussaint is the perfectly etched bully, complete with porcine eyes and a Hulk-like physique. The various Time Agents each have their part to play, and Channing's mentor and superior, Commodore Nelson, cuts the archetypal military leader, bent upon safeguarding Britain's naval primacy in a world caught upon a nuclear knife edge.

With such a rich array of characters we could almost forgive Gordon for letting his scenery slip a little, but not a bit of it. Put simply, *Journey's End* is a veritable treasure trove of craftily woven scenes and passages. One such outstanding moment is the scene in which the TARDIS is struck by the Null-Time event and is literally turned to stone. The Doctor, Silver and Mortimer race to escape the time ship's rapidly collapsing interior in jaw-dropping style. Crucially, it is an escape made all the more chilling – if you'll excuse the pun – by the onslaught of frost and ice, which remorselessly transforms the console room into a sub-zero prison, before finally reducing the TARDIS to a petrified state.

As Gordon himself writes, “*data is not an answer in and of itself.*” In a similar sense identifying the various qualities of *Journey's End* can only take us so far. For this is a narrative of rare complexity, bound together by a rich prose which ensures that the reader's attention is fixed throughout. And, any writer who can slip in what seems to be an oblique reference to Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (see Silver's thumbing through a copy of *Colluphid's Extraordinary Guide*) and who can make artful use of block transfer – also mentioned in Gordon's *Dawn of Time* – to create a pair of phantoms from the past, is unlikely to avoid receiving a perfect ten. This is a flawless finale. **10/10**