

THE CONSPIRATORS

Written by: Duncan Johnson

Season 33/Story 9R

Reviewed by Jez Strickley

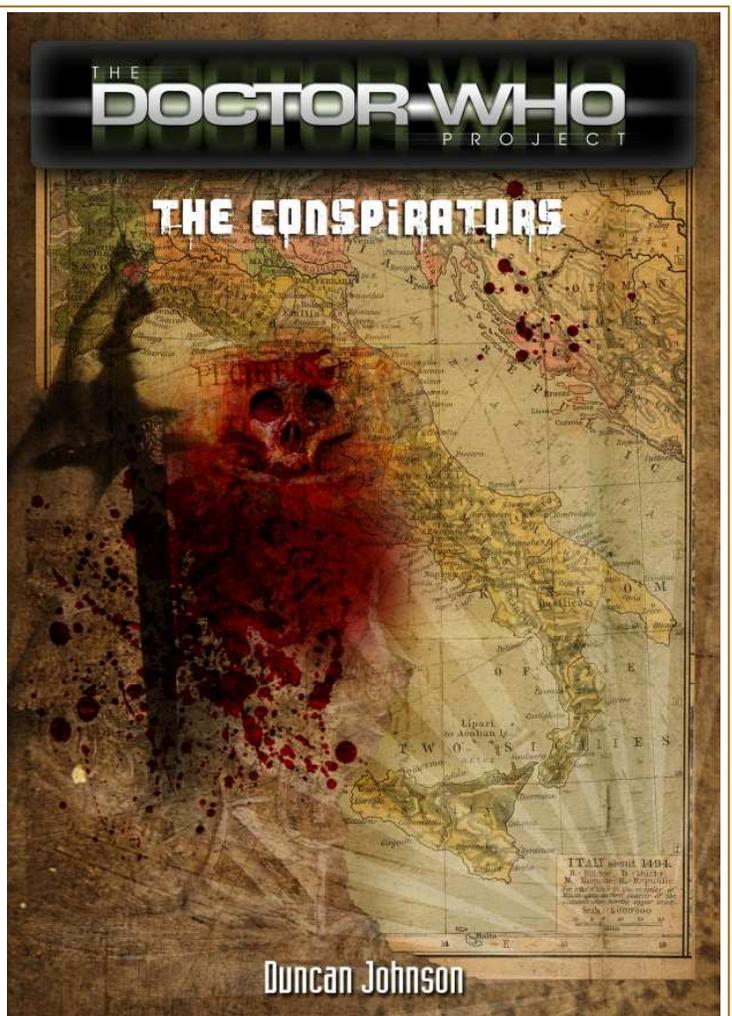
After a series of futuristic tales involving epic scale star battles, a cosmic plague and a serpentine foe from the old school of Who, *TDWP*'s now solitary Eighth Doctor finds himself caught up in the Florentine intrigues of Renaissance Italy in Duncan Johnson's highly commendable *The Conspirators*.

The adventure begins by dipping into the political dealings of the young Lorenzo de Medici, head of the vastly influential banking family and the *de facto* ruler of late fifteenth century Florence. These scenes offer a tantalising taste of Lorenzo's political savvy, as well as sketching an excellent picture of Florentine politics. And for those wondering whether Leonardo or Michelangelo makes an appearance, this tale steers clear of the obvious and embarks upon a different path. In fact, ever an eye for a tricky moment in time, Duncan Johnson craftily positions his narrative so that it hinges upon the deadly feud building between the de Medici and their rival family the Pazzi, thus rolling out a rich canvas upon which to etch his story.

Returning to the plot, the Doctor is swiftly apprehended by the Pazzi after another case of mistaken identity and very soon becomes shunted from one interrogation to another, all the while desperately trying his best not to tamper with the events unfolding around him - events which must happen as the history book tells it. Whilst being thrown from pillar to post the Doctor manages to encounter pretty much all the most powerful figures in Florence, including a juvenile Niccolò Machiavelli, making for a lengthy who's who of Renaissance politics, as well as presenting a highly enjoyable history lesson in the process. The various members of the rival families are well realised and their dialogue brings their political machinations to life in a lively fashion.

Intriguingly, Duncan Johnson's tale raises a challenge for the Doctor which involves getting something to happen that the Time Lord's arrival seems to have aborted. This problem makes for a healthy dose of fresh air in that there is not a single alien plot to unravel Earth history in sight. Instead, the Doctor's brief appearance sets off a chain of events which have the potential to derail history, and only his deliberate interference can put things right - a highly ironic solution and one which marks this story out as a very good piece of original fiction.

The Conspirators is a delightfully alien-free affair, harking back to the historical adventures of early Who. Too many of today's writers are fixed upon the narrow vista of extra-terrestrial antics and foretelling the future. Indeed, one need only to consider how the new series of *Doctor Who* continues where the classic left off, in terms of roundly



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snubbing the non-alien historical mystery, to see that this is the case. In *The Conspirators* however, we are presented with a gift wrapped adventure which is stoutly rooted in the intricate - and underused - mechanism of the past, making for a refreshing narrative which ought to encourage other scribes to give the purely historical adventure a go.

A further point which deserves noting is the style of the Doctor's arrival in Florence, seen as it is through the eyes of two young observers: a girl named Anna and an already thoughtful Machiavelli. By having the Doctor's entrance observed by way of two curious youths the reader's traditionally all-seeing perspective is given a nudge backwards and, perhaps more importantly, the Doctor's actions are

viewed under a different light.

One of the strengths of Duncan Johnson's writing is the way in which he takes care to offer something for everyone and does not take anything for granted: the reader who knows his or her way around Renaissance Florence is invited to enjoy a new standpoint, whilst for the novice there is enough attention to detail to keep them up to speed with the unraveling events.

If catering for all is one of Duncan Johnson's qualities, impeccably drawn backdrops is another. *The Conspirators* enjoins the reader to examine the vivid fabric of Renaissance Italy, its political happenings and its rich characters,

all woven out of a thick web of imagery. Such a strong style of descriptive writing raises up a fine narrative, loaded with historical bite and plenty of mystery.

Oh, and if all that was not enough, the sentence in which Lorenzo claims that he loves the young Machiavelli is an absolutely first class reference to the older Machiavelli's very real advice in his widely acclaimed *The Prince*. So, if you like an historical yarn this story will not disappoint, and in conspiring purely with bygone times its seam of story telling is a deep one.

Rating: 9/10