

CRADLE OF DEATH

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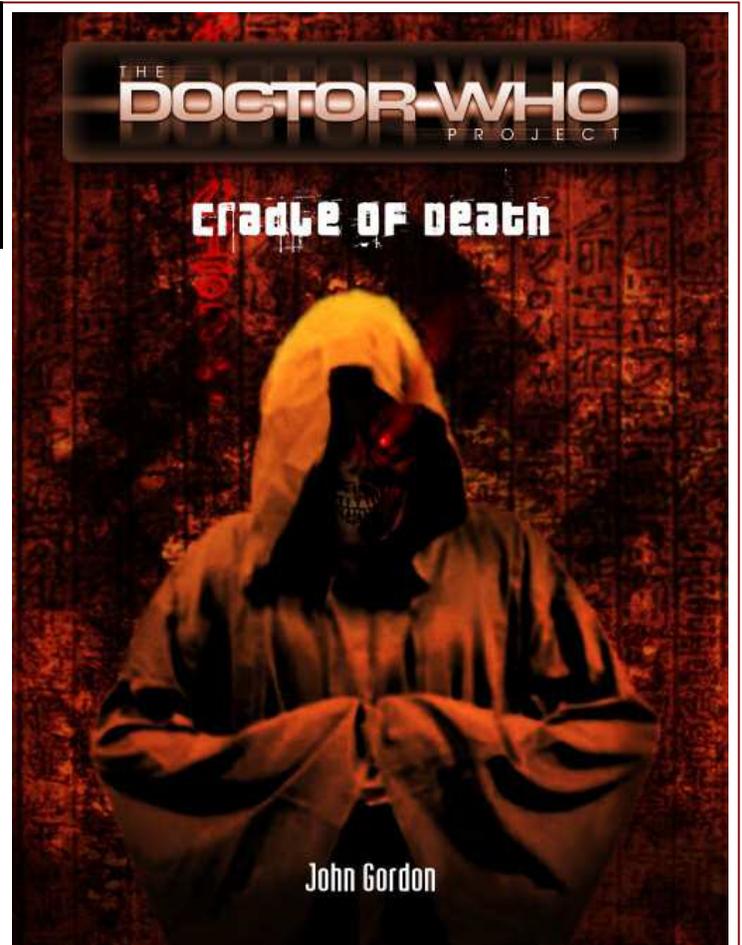
John Gordon is a past master at writing debut stories for TDWP seasons. To date he has conjured up two outstanding pieces in Season 33's *Dawn of Time* and more recently Season 34's *New Beginning*. Gordon's latest offering, *Cradle of Death*, sees him turn his considerable writing skills to the opposite challenge: assembling a season finale. It is a challenge which he dispatches in grand style.

A short prologue, set amongst the eerie, sand-filled tombs of Egypt reveals a dangerously obsessed Professor Icarus Phaide, who is determined to gain access to an ancient tomb. An intense series of exchanges between Phaide and his surveyor, Duncan Moon, lays the groundwork for a tautly written scene which, along with its fiery climax in which all appear to perish, firmly locks the reader's attention until the story is told.

A short time after the tumultuous events of the prologue the Doctor and Silver arrive in Cairo. The year is now 1938 and the muezzin's *azan*, or Call to Prayer, is still a live entreaty across the cityscape of Egypt's capital. The Doctor has decided to give Silver a tour of this exotic location by way of a *bona fide* history lesson, complete with a tour of the Nile. Of course, as with so many of the Doctor's best laid plans events soon take a very different turn, and the Doctor and Silver become separated during an angry crowd scene outside of the Egyptian Museum. The Doctor soon teams up with Captain James Reynolds, a member of the British Resident Police who is struggling to solve a series of murders and apparent body snatchings in or around the Egyptian Museum. In the meantime, Silver becomes caught up in Lucy Moon's search for her ill-fated brother Duncan, in the course of which the pair encounters the sinister Associate Director of the Egyptian Museum, Hamid Namin.

The Doctor's investigations lead him from the Belgian Hospice to the Bosphore Casino, where he meets three of Phaide's contemporaries: Piper, Clemenceau and McQuarrie. In the almost tangible decadence of the Casino these three Egyptologists explain the nature of Phaide's dig and the way in which the arrival of Raucher, a German academic-turned-SS colonel saw the Museum's grander projects re-directed towards those expeditions led by the German concession. Quiet explanations are soon interrupted by Raucher and his cronies, followed by a horde of zombies which descends upon the Casino and brings murderous havoc in its wake. In portraying this scene Gordon reveals that he is not squeamish in his prose, but he is mindful not to glory in the terrors unfolding in his tale.

As the story is propelled towards its climax the Doctor discovers that he is dealing with the terrible results of an



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alien artifact which has fallen into the wrong hands. The artifact in question is an Osiran Life-Cradle which has inadvertently rescued the living remains of Phaide and begun to regenerate his body. Part-way through this process Phaide has halted the regenerative program for the sake of diverting the Life-Cradle's power towards creating an army of animated corpses, which in turn he plans to use to prevent a future genocide: the Holocaust, the horrors of which he has learnt about whilst probing Silver's mind.

The conclusion is highly satisfying, involving as it does an array of tightly packed action sequences which are contrasted by some meaty exchanges between the Doctor and his latest antagonist. The manner in which the Doctor's ultimate escape comes about through the final action of his apparent foe avoids the sort of black and white finishes which deny debate, and provides yet another juicy instance

to feed the cogitations of fandom.

In so far as descriptions are concerned the reader is met with an embarrassment of riches as Gordon's local knowledge enables him to paint a backdrop which is as vivid as it is inspired. The Bosphore Casino is just one of the many splendidly woven examples on offer and, coupled with the occasional well chosen Arabic term, the reader is given an authentic taste of early twentieth century Egypt and its ancient glories, haphazardly caught up in the final gestures of colonialism.

Smooth transitions are as crucial to good story telling as vibrant imagery, and in nimbly moving between scenes Gordon betrays his writing pedigree by keeping the reader on the edge of their seat: the juxtaposing of the Doctor's disturbing visit to the Belgian Hospice, and Silver and Lucy encountering Namin and his zombies in the Egyptian Museum is inch-perfect, creating a series of scenes which build towards a point of almost unbearable tension before briefly easing the pressure, only to jack it up once again.

Gordon's deft touch with *TDWP*'s Ninth Doctor continues unabated, and the Egyptian setting, replete with asides to celebrity writers and the leftovers of Victorian Britain, only goes to emphasize the new Doctor's old world charm and Holmesian deductions. Silver's character is particularly well drawn, and her youthful enthusiasm and buoyant personality make her the ideal foil for the more serious Ninth Doctor. What is more, in this particular Doctor-companion team there is a good deal of mutual trust, a point evidenced by the way in which the Doctor is not panicked by their separation early in the story; Silver's high-octane escape from the Egyptian Museum on a Norton courier bike proves that her mentor's faith is not misplaced.

Alongside the Doctor and Silver the various guest characters reveal that they are more than up to the job of keeping up with the regulars. Lucy Moon is given the chance to be more than just a helpless side-kick to Silver, and ultimately demonstrates her own brand of inner strength as the story approaches its end. Captain Reynolds is a sturdy and likeable hero, whose encounter with a "death-Ark" is certain to raise a few goose bumps for some readers. Raucher manages to breathe life into the stereotypical Nazi ideologue; and Namin is a cold-blooded killer whose soul has arguably plunged some way further than that of his master. And last, but certainly not least, there is Phaide: the main villain of the piece, whose motives are a tangled web of hatred and genuine benevolence, nourished by the sort of delusions which only come about through absolute power. In this last sense Phaide echoes the very same insane philanthropy as Craig Charlesworth's LeVay (see Season 34's *Laplace's Demon*) and, to a lesser extent, Jodie van de Wetering's D'Asquoin (see Season 34's *Does It Matter?*). All three seek an apparent good without question; and all three fail to recognize how far they have fallen.

As one of *TDWP*'s most accomplished authors Gordon is not known for dishing up appetizers or first courses, and *Cradle of Death* is a fantastic, action-packed main course which juggles shades of Spielberg's 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' with out-and-out zombie horror and an artfully crafted re-visit of the mysterious Osirans of 'The Pyramids of Mars' fame. And all of which is served up amongst the beautifully fashioned spectacle of 1930s Egypt. Season 34 is possibly the best set of *TDWP* stories thus far, and *Cradle of Death* is the icing on the cake.

Rating: 10/10