

AURUM IN PLUMBUM

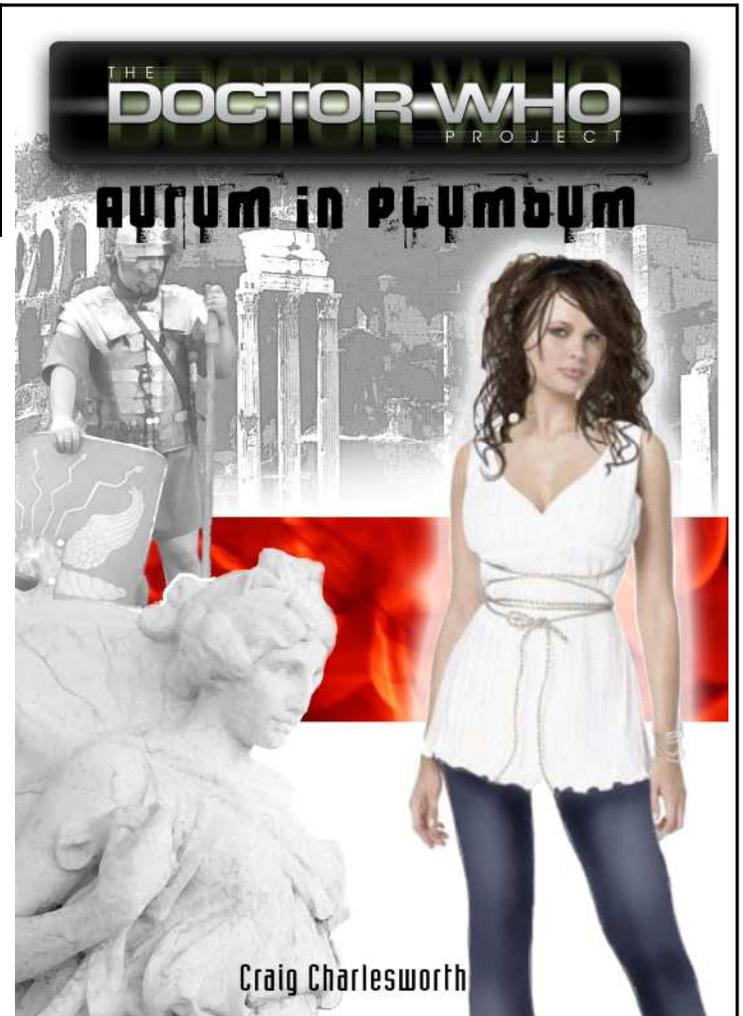
Written by: Craig Charlesworth
Season 35 ▪ Story 10Q
Reviewed by Jez Strickley

Craig Charlesworth is a writer with a penchant for intriguing story titles. The nomenclature of his Season 34 adventure *Laplace's Demon* has its roots in a similarly titled horror-based video game, whilst his subtle changing of Charles Dickens' festive classic gave us *A Christmas Story* – TDWP's first Yuletide offering. His latest adventure, *Aurum In Plumbum* is no exception to Charlesworth's rule, and like its predecessors it manages to hook the reader's curiosity before even the first word has been read.

Aurum In Plumbum wastes little time in propelling the reader into its tale. Within just a few pages a case of temporal tampering has come to the fore in the shape of a Roman soldier being shot dead by a projectile centuries ahead of its time. Moments later the Doctor, Silver and Mortimer are placed centre stage as the Time Lord takes his companions to Ancient Rome shortly after the catastrophic fire which its incumbent Emperor, Nero, allegedly had a hand in starting. Soon after their arrival another inexplicable murder leads the Doctor into hot water as he is mistaken for the killer and arrested. Whilst incarcerated he befriends Cornelius, the guard whose friend Marcus was the first victim of these extraordinary deaths. Quite unexpectedly the Doctor is then released upon the order of the sinister Senator Lucan, who is intent upon blaming the murders on divine retribution. Free once more the Doctor teams up with Cornelius to solve the mystery and put a stop to the futuristic assassin.

In the meantime Silver and Mortimer wash up in a local tavern, where they meet the raven haired Cassius, a man who appears just that little bit too friendly to be genuine. Silver's decision to stay in Cassius' villa almost proves fatal as the chiseled charmer is revealed to be the villain of the piece and a dangerously psychotic one at that. Fortunately for Silver Cornelius is on hand to play her knight-in-shining-armor, and his brief battle against the devious assassin is nail-biting stuff. Still further, although its conclusion essentially amounts to a draw, it is good to read of Cassius' resorting to a coward's exit by way of a portable TARDIS-like device called a 'hopper' – a great idea, and one which deserves to be used in future stories.

As the Doctor's investigations reach their climax Cassius is



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hired to assassinate Nero, leaving the Doctor facing another temporal threat of massive proportions. The Doctor's apparent pinning down of Cassius' vantage point for the shooting of Nero gives us just the sort of deductive reasoning moment which has made the Time Lord such an enduring hero, and the final twist affords Silver and Mortimer their moment of glory, leaving honours equal amongst the TARDIS crew.

As a part-historical part-science fiction adventure *Aurum In Plumbum* admirably balances its parts, mixing temporal meddling with a fine tour of Ancient Rome which is replete with currency, geography and architecture. Add to

this Charlesworth's mindfulness of the Doctor's caution whilst exploring established history and you find yourself caught up in a very well written piece of *Who*. The relationship between the time travellers feels increasingly comfortable, and I for one am a fan of *TDWP*'s Ninth Doctor-Silver combination. Plus, with a genetically enhanced cat in the shape of Mortimer this particular TARDIS crew must be one of the more innovative to be found on either paper or on the small screen. The various guest characters also work well. Lucan is the archetypal underhanded politician, whose dark dealings are justified by his gaze being rigidly fixed on that wonderfully ambiguous concept, the common good. In turn, Lucan's gun-for-hire, Cassius, is a nasty piece of work whose sadistic qualities make him a highly potent foe. His final unmasking adds a nice touch to the climax and leaves behind it yet more questions to be answered, perhaps in a later adventure.

raises the question of the historical influence of individuals such as Cornelius, who might be referred to as history's invisible figures. Such figures play a critical role in some of the greatest turning points of the past, and yet ultimately go unnoticed in the broader scheme of things. In this sense Charlesworth's tale moves beyond formulaic story telling and enters the realms of critical narration, an attribute which makes this adventure deserving of considerable credit.

Aurum In Plumbum delivers a well-paced story which avoids trapping the reader in the heavy ponderings of time meddling, yet highlights this intriguing issue for those who wish to pursue it in more depth. In all, this adventure makes for a great slice of fiction, which more than maintains *TDWP*'s reputation as one of the standard bearers of fan fiction.

Beyond these admirable qualities *Aurum In Plumbum* also

Rating: 9.5/10