

# DOCTOR WHO AND THE CURSE OF THE JADE SKULL

Written by: Arnold T. Blumberg

Additional Material by Jodie van de Wetering and  
Stephanie Crawford

Season 35 ▪ Story 10N

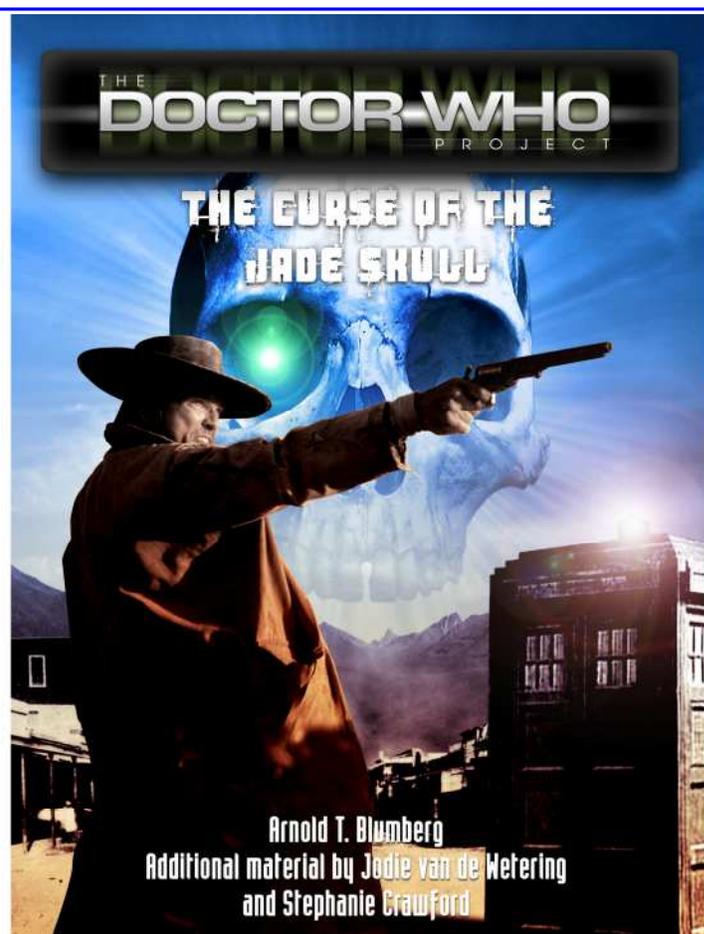
Reviewed by Jez Strickley

Arnold T. Blumberg is no stranger to writing fact and fiction on the topic of *Doctor Who*. His efforts for Telos Publishing make plain that he is no also-ran, and his association with TDWP last saw him penning Season 32's *The Soul Men*. This time round Blumberg sets his sights on the Wild West of nineteenth century North America, and the story of Daniel Edward Cayde, a 'dead shot' and hired killer with a penchant for straight talking.

Cayde's tale is set in motion when he is hired by Byron Crawford, a man with the wealth to found his own mining town. As a test for his new gun-for-hire Crawford sets Cayde the job of dispensing with a particularly nasty vampire, signalling that Cayde's hits are not confined to the common or garden felon. Having pulled off his first assignment Cayde is then given his second, all together grander challenge: go to the town of Crawford in Wyoming and recover a jade skull. Plain it may be, but simple it certainly is not. Interestingly, how many people may die along the way does not concern Cayde's latest employer; all that matters is that he finds and retrieves the titular skull.

The skull in question is soon revealed to a hapless miner, Jordy Kingsley, whose discovery of the strange green artefact in Crawford's coal mine is quickly followed by his sudden and terrible death upon touching it – a death not without irony, given that the tragic Jordy had seen his finding of the skull as his means of escape from the dangerous business of mining.

Cayde's arrival in Crawford sees him team up with two other visitors, the mysterious Doctor and his fiery assistant Silver. The three are then guided to the cavern in which the skull was found and in due course recover it, only to be ambushed by two rogue miners who subsequently flee with the deadly artefact. A somewhat surprised Cayde is dispatched by the Doctor to retrieve the skull, only to encounter a newly arisen army of ravenous zombies. With the undead drawing in, and only Cayde's sharp shooting to protect himself and Silver, the Doctor



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finally identifies the skull as the Key to Life, a contemporary of the Key to Time and a device capable of re-ordering the natural course of life, thus bringing destructive havoc in its wake. The unexpected arrival of Cayde's mysterious employer pushes events towards their climax as the mine town owner is revealed to be anything but a curiosity hunter. Soon the Doctor is pitched against a deadly foe who proves to have more than a passing resemblance to a certain shadowy villain of the Fourth Doctor's era. The final solution to the Key to Life is explosive to say the least, and when the decimated town of Crawford and its zombie-eaten inhabitants are restored, Blumberg cleverly sidesteps calls of a *deus ex machina* ending by dint of who shows up to return things to their normal state.

From the very first page Cayde's narration of this murky tale is a feast of character-rich writing. Blumberg's choice of story telling devices breathes three-dimensional life into the cynical gunslinger, and simultaneously gives the reader a bird's eye view of the unfolding events. More, Blumberg's writing really shines out in the way in which he pays close attention to the minor characters – especially those who appear for just a page or two. For example, the ponderings of gravedigger Bobby, and his exchanges with the undertaker, Mr. Willoughby, over the burial of Jordy Kingsley are thoughtfully crafted, lending depth to their characters in only a handful of words. On the same note the confidence trickster Garrity is a quality creation, and his ghastly demise has a wonderfully ironic twist to it.

The zombie attack is well staged, and the Doctor's observation that "*The vast majority of them [zombie films] are poorly produced rubbish...*" sounds very much like the author himself inserting his view on the state of some horror films, although this may be an assumption too far. Oh, and a further Time Lord comment "*I find your lack of faith disturbing*" is very much in the vein of a line uttered by a certain Sith Lord in *Star Wars Episode IV – A New Hope*.

One minor inconsistency, if you can call it that, lies in Silver's strong sense of revulsion at the undead army. Although this reaction is perfectly understandable in itself, it seems a little out of character when considering how well she fought off a similarly horrific legion in Craig Charlesworth's *Laplace's Demon*. Having said that, it could be simply that Silver has had enough of such gruesome encounters. Alternatively, perhaps I'm just being too picky.

Retrieving a piece of *Doctor Who* mythology in the guise of the Key to Time and re-fashioning it for a new tale, along with the mention of some blue crystals – of *Planet of the Spiders* perhaps? – gives a fine foundation to a story line which is nicely pointed by courtesy of its chapter headings. Zombies and old favourites from the television series, coupled with a setting which is so well described that you can almost feel the dust of Wyoming on the pages, deliver an adventure which consistently holds its course from start to finish. And the gunslinger Cayde should almost certainly go down as one of the best guest characters to appear in *TDWP*. As a whole, *The Curse of the Jade Skull* is a high quality adventure and well worth reading. **Rating: 9/10**