

DREADNOUGHT

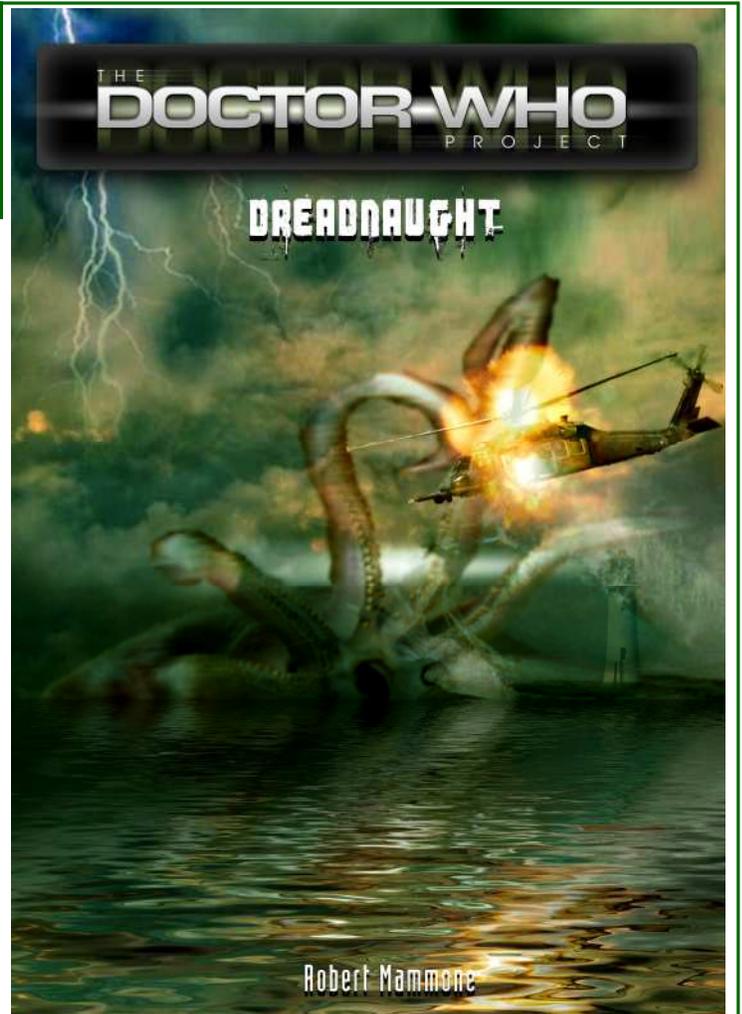
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Season 35 • Story 10T
Reviewed by Jez Strickley

An intriguing extract from a nineteenth-century edition of *The Economist* welcomes the reader to Robert Mammone's TDWP debut story *Dreadnought*, an adventure richly sustained by metaphor and simile, and underpinned by a well-shaped plot which sees planet Earth threatened by a force drawn from our darkest fears, and given shape by way of a Kraken-like beast best left buried.

Mammone launches his tale through a series of short excerpts which are finely judged to whet the reader's appetite. The meat of the story then comes to the fore with a gripping sea-based skirmish which sees Harker, the captain of a fishing trawler, bite off far more than he can chew when his ship comes to the aid of a stricken mariner, Wells, and his unseen cargo. Soon enough captain and crew come to an unpleasant end as Wells is revealed to be more than – or should that be less than? – human. In the meantime Wells' precious cargo is merely hinted at, creating a tension which is just the first rung on a ladder of escalating anxiety.

A brief lull follows, during which we meet the unusual Shelby, an innocent boy who becomes pivotal to later events. Terror is not far behind, however, as Shelby's evening walk towards the harbourside of Calcorn, a remote Scottish village, ends in abject horror when the evil unleashed upon the fishing trawler reaches dry land. It's difficult to convey the sheer blackness of Mammone's monstrous threat here, suffice it to say that the imagery he conjures up is made all the more disturbing by courtesy of its vagueness. Adjectives like 'ropy' and 'pulpy' inspire all manner of sinister imaginings in the reader's mind – and the story has barely even begun.

Shelby's awful experience is neatly followed by Silver receiving a hellish vision in the midst of a Wicca ritual aboard the TARDIS, a vision synonymous with whatever malignant agency has only recently arisen on Earth. Before she can ponder her dark revelation any further the TARDIS receives an unexpected battering from a psychic pulse. The Doctor tracks the pulse to Calcorn, whereupon the pair – along with Shelby and the surviving soldiers of an army helicopter crash – are caught up in a desperate mission to save every living being on Earth from certain annihilation.



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In particular, Mammone's literary muscles are given a serious workout when he engages the reader in an eerie dreamscape as the deadly Weaver – the title given to the *Dreadnought's* mental threat – attempts to ensnare Silver in its virtual web. For the eagle-eyed reader it will be plain from the start that this nightmarish sequence takes up with the events – fictive or otherwise – which follow the incident described in *The Economist*, so craftily seeded at the very outset of the adventure.

But it is much more than an artful piece of linkage. In fact, the scene in question lasts for a number of pages

and sees the author vigorously painting a rich, tangible canvas of disquieting details. One of the great qualities of TDWP is the sheer range of writing styles – never mind story lines – contained in a given season, and Season 35 is no exception. In *Dreadnought* we find a writer who is intent upon firing the reader’s curiosity by delivering one excellent passage after another. Quite frankly there are simply too many choice examples to draw upon within the limits of this brief review. So, instead of cherry picking one or two slices of prose, let us consider the full gamut of images presented between pages twenty-six and thirty-eight, which is surely some of the best around.

The Doctor and Silver come across well, and the latter gets to show her growing mental toughness in combating the Weaver. The stalwart Captain Striker is a soldier very much in the mould of the classic *Who* military mindset, albeit refreshingly willing to be proven wrong and, still further, prepared to admit as much. But is it Shelby who really shines out as a prime piece of characterisation given polish by his uncommon condition: a possible case of autism. Put another way, Shelby is no token to political correctness, nor a village simpleton; his presence is fundamental to the story and Mammone demonstrates a con-

sidered hand in delivering such a well thought out figure. And let us not forget the doomed Wells, whose dark aspect is, as the Doctor observes, both pitiful and pitiable.

Sharply drawn characterisations are one staple of good story telling; a superb villain or monster of the piece is another vital element, and the *Dreadnought* certainly lives up to its billing. There is something deeply disturbing about maritime threats; they inhabit an environment which leaves us impotent. In the case of the *Dreadnought* we not only have the gut-wrenching fear of the deep sea behemoth, but also a lethal psychic aspect which, coupled with its obscene re-shaping of living beings into marionette grotesques, make it a gruesome threat indeed.

Incidentally, ‘*Dreadnought*’ was the name given to the first of a new generation of warship launched by the British Royal Navy in 1906. It was a class of battleship which rendered previous models obsolete, and in Mammone’s *Dreadnought* we have a narrative which certainly does its best to outclass its contemporaries. In short, Robert Mammone’s *Dreadnought* comes highly recommend. **9/10**