

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief, I'm Eric Molinsky.

There's a bar called The Way Station, which is near my home in Brooklyn. From the outside, it looks like a normal bar. But when you go in, something pops right out at you. A blue Police Box.

ANDY: Every day I open up the shutters and I see her sitting in the corner it's just like I feel like home.

That's because the owner of the bar, Andy Heidel, is a huge Doctor Who fan. Even if you've never watched Doctor Who, you probably know that police box has something to do with it. You might also notice that Doctor Who is playing on the back wall, all the time – usually an episode from the mid 2000s when David Tennant played the Doctor. Every fan has “their Doctor.” David Tennant is Andy's favorite. He's my favorite Doctor too.

ANDY: And nobody can say I'm sorry like Tennant like if I if I'm dying I'm on my deathbed I make a wish foundation that is for him to come and told me I'm sorry.

THE DOCTOR: I'm sorry. I'm so sorry

So what does the Police Box have to do with Doctor Who? On the show, it's a ship called the TARDIS. And it may look like a police box on the outside but it's optical illusion meant to disguise the giant space ship on the inside. It's a running gag on the show, every time a new character goes into the TARDIS, they say:

MONTAGE: “It's much bigger on the inside!”

The TARDIS at the bar is the entrance to a unisex bathroom – which is not as exciting as a spaceship that can go back in time, but it's still an optical illusion.

ME ON TAPE: Oh my God. So on the inside here I'm in the bathroom here. I see a painting of weeping angels. (FADE OUT)

There are paintings of Doctor Who characters on the walls – and an autograph from Matt Smith, who played the main character after David Tennant. Matt Smith actually came to the Weigh Station, with the show

runner Stephen Moffat, when they were promoting Doctor Who. But their hotel didn't have BBC America, so they watched it at the Way Station bar.

ANDY: And they came and watched it with everyone, and I look at the TARDIS look at Matt Smith and watch Matt Smith watch himself on TV as the doctor walking into the TARDIS. It's mind blowing.

And then did Matt Smith go to the bathroom?

ANDY: And then he did. It was the circle of life.

Now, Doctor Who has always been a cult show in the United States. But it's a much bigger deal the UK.

ROBIN: In the United Kingdom Doctor Who is kind of part of our national culture. So there are various things, which unite us as a nation. One of which is the National Health Service I think to some extent the royal family. But Doctor Who is one of those things.

Robin Bunce teaches history and culture at the University of Cambridge.

ROBIN: I think the Doctor is essentially he's a modern day Sherlock Holmes. So he's kind of based on a particular type of British male hero type figure and he's also to some extent the gentleman explorer that also is hardwired into British culture as well to some extent.

NICK: It's the jewel in the BBC crown.

Nick Randall is a studio manager at BBC radio, and a massive Doctor Who fan. He says the entrance to the BBC also has a prop version of The TARDIS police box.

NICK: And every night as I walk out and I grab my paper and I walk out of a building I just I just look over there thinking oh she was real I wish I could just pop in and just run around like huge room.

I know how he feels. I didn't start watching Doctor Who until a few months ago – after friends and listeners had been urging me to watch it for years. I was intimidated because Doctor Who is so dense. It has such a long

history, it can be hard for casual viewers to jump in. But once I got the hang of it, I couldn't believe how quickly I fell in love with the show.

But if you've never watched a single episode and you're still confused -- let's zoom out and look at the big picture:

The original run of Doctor Who was on the BBC from 1963 to 1989. There was a made-for-TV movie in 1996 that was supposed to reboot the series but it didn't take. Finally in 2005, Doctor Who returned to the BBC -- lead by a writer named Russell T. Davies.

Now Davies had been a fan since he was a kid, but he felt the show needed a modern feel to it. He was also an admirer of the Joss Whedon style of storytelling, where fantasy tropes were used as metaphors to explore very relatable human experiences. Davies is no longer with Doctor Who -- but his version of the show that's still on the air. And it wasn't a complete reboot. The events that happened on the original run of Doctor Who are still part of this character's backstory.

You see, The Doctor is an alien. He gave himself that name, The Doctor. The title of the show is actually a question.

CLARA: Who are you?

THE DOCTOR: The Doctor

CLARA: Doctor who?

THE DOCTOR: No, just The Doctor. Actually, sorry, could you ask me that again?

CLARA: Could I what?

THE DOCTOR: Would you just ask me that question again?

CLARA: Doctor Who?

THE DOCTOR: Okay, just once more

CLARA: Doctor who?

THE DOCTOR: Oooh! Do you know, I never realizes how much I enjoy hearing that said out loud. Thank you.

CLARA: Okay. (SLAMS DOOR)

We only know a few facts about where this character came from. We know he's from a planet called Gallifrey, which is run by Time Lords that look like us, but they have a vastly superior intelligence and they can travel in space in time to bear witness to history.

The Doctor is a rebel. He stole one of the time traveling space ships – the TARDIS -- because he wants to be a part of it.

The other thing about Time Lords is that they can live multiple lives. Whenever The Doctor dies to save the world -- he regenerates into a different human form. And thus we have a new actor playing The Doctor.

And that idea of regeneration is what hooked me on to Doctor Who. And you probably heard the big news that at the end of last year, The Doctor regenerated into a woman. Jodie Whittaker will begin her first full season as The Doctor in the Fall. There's also going to be a new show runner.

So once again, Doctor Who is at a crossroads. After more than 54 years of TV episodes, movies, audio dramas, comic books and novels, the entire franchise is about to regenerate again.

I think regeneration is the key to why Doctor Who has been a global icon for more than half a century. But I wanted to know if there's something more to this theme – something personal that resonates with fans no matter where or when they discovered The Doctor.

So sit back and relax, because we have a long journey ahead through time and space.

>> BREAK

Before I start, I need say this mini-series is going to be full of spoilers. Some of the best moments in the show's history are too interesting to ignore. But if you want to do a deep binge before you listen, the modern show is streaming on Amazon and the classic series is on Brit Box.

Let's begin in 1966. In a later episode, I'm going to talk about how the show started in 1963 – which is a really interesting story – but let's start in 1966. Doctor Who is a popular black and white children's show airing on Saturdays. The Doctor is played by William Hartnell. he was in his late '50s but he looked a lot older. And he played the Doctor like a Victorian schoolmaster, clutching his lapels, making pronouncements with a twinkle in his eye.

But there was one problem. William Hartnell's health was deteriorating. He couldn't keep up the schedule, and he was flubbing his lines.

CLIP: WILLIAM HARTNELL FLUBBING LINES

So the producers made a tough choice – or we hope it was a tough choice. They decided to fire William Hartnell and bring in another actor to play The Doctor.

We can imagine what that moment was like because it was dramatized in a made-for-TV movie the BBC produced to celebrate the show's 50th anniversary in 2013. William Hartnell was played David Bradley. And Brian Cox played Doctor Who's first producer Sydney Newman.

SYDNEY: We've got great plans for 'Doctor Who', Bill, believe you me. Great plans. We're hundred percent committed too.

BILL: I'm very glad to hear it!

SYDNEY: But we're looking at ways of...refreshing it. Um... Regenerating it.

BILL: Hm. Yes. Quite right. Spice things up a bit.

SYDNEY: Bill -

BILL: I'm glad we're on the same wavelength anyway!

SYDNEY: Bill... hell, there's no easy way of saying this... We want 'Doctor Who' to go on.

BILL Yes.

SYDNEY: But not with you. (BEAT) Like you said, things have got to change.

Nick Randell works at the BBC today. He still can't get over the way they recast The Doctor.

NICK: Because if I was a TV producer and my lead actor was forgetting his lines and he wasn't well and was getting on a bit. But the show was proving popular. I would either can the show think of another science fiction show that would cover similar basis but will be different. Or if I was going to recast I would either get somebody who looked as close as William Hartnell did and put the wig on them and when we talk about regeneration rejuvenation I would imagine perhaps a younger version of the same actor. So somebody who looked like a young William Hartnell. I wouldn't try to think of getting an actor who looked like look nothing like him at all not even pretending to look anything like him and also to encourage him to play it in such a different way.

But that's what happened when Patrick Trouton become the second actor to play The Doctor.

NICK: So I think that is so outrageously bonkers but it's brilliant.

And thus a pattern emerged. A character actor would be cast as The Doctor. He'd take the character in whatever direction he wanted, unless the show runner had other ideas. When the actor got tired of the role – or he was worried he was being too closely associated with it -- he'd move on.

In the original series, a typical regeneration would have The Doctor lying down – sleeping or dead. Then they'd cross fade to the next actor lying down in the same clothes. In the modern series, the regenerations are more dramatic. A golden light blasts from the Doctor's hands and head like fireworks. Either way, the new Doctor wakes up, looks in the mirror and examines his new face.

That transition can be hard for younger fans. When Robin Bunce was a kid, he loved Tom Baker's Doctor. And since Robin's father worked at the BBC, he got them behind-scenes-access.

ROBIN: As I was leaving the set Tom Baker strode on and he was in costume and he looked and sounded every inch the doctor and he asked me my name and he asked me if I wanted a jelly baby.

Which is like a gummy bear. That's something Tom Baker would do on the show, he's offer jelly babies to the villains at the most appropriate times.

MONTAGE: "Would you like a Jelly Baby?"

And then, Tom Baker left. No more jelly babies. No more floppy hat, no more ridiculously long scarf.

The next Doctor – played by Peter Davison – had wispy blonde hair, and dressed like a gentleman about to play cricket. I wondered if that was traumatic for Robin.

ROBIN: Oh enormously. Yes enormously. In fact I didn't watch the show for two years after that, to this day I've never forgiven Peter Davison for not being Tom Baker and with that the trauma of my life is that as a young man I used to look a

bit like Peter Davison. So when people discovered I liked Doctor Who and they say Oh yeah and of course you look like Peter Davison, which is exactly the wrong thing to say to me.

But I started wondering what do all these different versions of the character have in common? Other than the fact that they've been white British men until recently, the actors look nothing alike. And we don't know anything about The Doctor's backstory. How is this a single consistent character?

There's a famous quote that a lot of writers and actors reference as a lodestar for how to create the character. It comes from Terrance Dicks, who wrote Doctor Who in the '70s. And he said: "The Doctor never gives in, and never gives up, however overwhelming the odds against him. The Doctor believes in good and fights evil. Though often caught up in violent situations, he is a man of peace. He is never cruel or cowardly."

The playwright Mac Rogers recaps Doctor Who for Slate. When he was a kid, The Doctor was an inspiration for him because here was a male role model that didn't rely on any weapons. The Doctor outsmarted the villains, and often had compassion for them. But Mac says, there's a key question about The Doctor, which is baked into the format of the show – which promises a new location in history or in space every storyline.

MAC: Is the doctor on a quest to fight evil or not? And that's something that's fluctuated many times in the show's history. Are his adventures part of a quest or are they just an epic series of failed attempts to go on holiday?

Each version of The Doctor wrestles with these conflicting impulses.

Like in the 2006 episode The Christmas Invasion, aliens invade the Earth. The Doctor convinces them to leave. But just as they're flying away, the Prime Minister Harriet Jones orders the alien ship to be blown out of the sky. The Doctor is horrified.

THE DOCTOR: That was murder.

HARRIET JONES: That was defense. It's adapted from alien technology. A ship that felt worth ten years ago

THE DOCTOR: But they were leaving.

HARRIET JONES: You said yourself doctor they'd go back to the stars and tell others about the earth. I'm sorry doctor but you are not here all the time you

come and go. It happened today Mr. Llewellyn and the Major. They were murdered. They died right in front of me while you were sleeping. In which case, we have to defend ourselves.

The Doctor's relationship with the human race is sometimes like a step-parent who really wants to be impress us – we're his favorite species – but then he can flip and deliver harsh lectures on why we're not living up to our potential.

Mac thinks this aspect of Doctor's persona also emerged from the format of the show, because Doctor Who has always appealed to children.

MAC: I think a certain point the doctor very often needs to spell out the moral of the story because where adult critical faculties might tease out that moral from the actions of the story from what the villain represents from what the victims of the villain represent -- an adult with a full set of developed critical faculties can look at that stuff and glean what philosophy the doctor has been fighting on behalf of. So I sometimes think that's an external consideration and sometimes I think the doctor is just genuinely really arrogant because he spends almost his entire life around less smart people. He very rarely bumps into someone who shares his intellect

EMILY: I do think that there is a little bit up of smart guys power fantasy there. I think there is there's the aspect of like you know we always talk about the male power fantasy

It's like you know big guys like the beta male parent power fantasy.

EMILY: Exactly. It kind of is especially. I mean if you're like a nerdy lady you've had guys I mean I've had guys come up and try to splain Doctor Who to me which is hilarious because I'm like you're doing. You're just sort of aping your favorite character. You're doing what he does.

Emily Asher-Perrin works for the website Tor. And she wrote a really interesting essay where she argued that if you look at the whole arc of the series, the regenerations aren't random, based on which actor was available at the time and how they decided to interpret the character. She thinks the character has taken on a life of its own and his regenerations have been part a long process in which he's been on a quest of self-improvement, trying to change for the better.

And since we have a time machine – let’s go back that moment in 1966 when Patrick Trouton took over the role of The Doctor from the first to actor to play him, William Hartnell.

EMILY: So he changes it up and very interestingly you get this sort of weird goofy guy with the haircut that's supposed to be reminiscent of The Beatles which is strange. But you get someone with a bigger sense of humor you sort of get the impression that William Hartnell's doctor with a little fusty and he had very specific ideas of how things needed to be done and maybe he thought hey you know I could stand to be a little bit looser a little bit more chill.

But The Second Doctor is too much of a rebel. He’s forced to regenerate as a punishment by his superiors. So the third Doctor is strictly business, no monkeying around, doesn’t suffer fools.

EMILY: Sort of maybe you need to be a little bit more of a leader and stop messing around you know behind the scenes like actually take some responsibility.

There’s another question the Doctor is wrestling with. He’s this lonely immortal alien character, and he likes to have people travel with him on the TARDIS. But how close should he get to these people? If they get killed, is that his fault?

Emily says this question comes to a crisis with the Fifth Doctor – played by Peter Davison -- who has a gaggle of companions.

EMILY: The Fifth Doctor had so much tragedy before he regenerated. He had all of these companions on the TARDIS and he clearly liked having a big crew. And then they all left him usually and traumatizing circumstances. And so he regenerates in this position of really feeling like he's not a good person to be around. Like he's kind of a really unlucky Penny.

So he turns into the much-maligned Sixth Doctor, played by Colin Baker.

EMILY: And the Sixth Doctor is incredibly pompous and he seems sort of arrogant and the Doctor still in there and he's still wonderful but also he's very clearly scarred by what happened previously.

THE DOCTOR: Whatever else happens, I am The Doctor, whether you like it or not.

A lot of people didn't like it. And looking back, that was the beginning of the end for the classic series.

When the show came back in 2005 -- with Christopher Eccelston playing The Doctor -- the writers gave him a surprisingly dark backstory, which would affect all his future regenerations, and play into these two questions of whether he wants to be a hero, or just a traveler, and how close he should get to people.

We learn that while the show as off the air, The Doctor's home planet Gallifrey went to war with their arch nemesis -- an alien species called The Daleks. To save the universe from being sucked into this all-consuming war, The Doctor ignited a doomsday device that killed the Daleks and his own people.

EMILY: Ninth Doctor is born out of PTSD and he is very broken and very wounded and very hurt and he doesn't know how to handle any of his emotions because he regenerated out of you know what he thinks was genocide double genocide.

The Doctor's new companion is a working class girl named Rose, played by Billie Piper.

EMILY: But when he goes to find a companion the first thing that he does is take her to see the destruction of her planet. And he wants to know if she can shoulder the burden the way he's having to shoulder it and if she can, she's the perfect companion. What happens he takes her out of the TARDIS after showing her all that and he wants to know how she's going to react and her first reaction is I want to eat chips and that's it. It's perfect. She's exactly what he needs at that point in time.

ROSE: I want...chips.

Then The Doctor does something very unusual. He falls in love with his companion.

EMILY: But what happens all the time people keep saying he's a little bit older for you. A little bit a little bit too much. This is not really a good idea. He looks like he's in his 40s and you're 20. He regenerates into the perfect person for her. No one will ever say he's too old again. They look like a pair. He also apes her accent, which I think is precious.

Oh my God! I was wondering why Tennant picked that accent.

EMILY: Yes!

They end up separated for completely fantastical reasons that I won't go into involving parallel universes, but The tenth Doctor never gets over that loss. The eleventh Doctor, played by Matt Smith, is very quirky and fun but he's also all about repressing emotions. And after he loses companions he cares about, we finally get the grumpy Twelfth Doctor, played by Peter Capaldi, who feels everything he's been repressing since the modern show began. Also the Doctor's personality pendulum swings back. He had become a swashbuckling hero out to impress us – now he's a brainy misfit again, who keeps humanity at arms length.

This Doctor finally comes to peace with himself, and you feel the character full circle again. But he also senses that his mansplaining or alien-splaining is getting tiresome. And with that thought, he becomes the Thirtieth Doctor, played Jodie Whittaker. And her reaction, when she sees her reflection for the first time, is priceless.

THE DOCTOR: Aw, brilliant!

The symbolism of The Doctor's gender change has not been lost on transgender fans like Riley Silverman, who is a stand-up comedian in L.A., whose transition will be complete by the Fall, when Jodie Whittaker begins her official run as The Doctor.

Back in 2013, when Riley was just beginning her transition, she had an epiphany when she watched Matt Smith's Doctor grapple with his identify as he faced his final minutes in his body.

THE DOCTOR: We all change, when you think about it, we're all different people; all through our lives, and that's okay, that's good, you've gotta keep moving, so long as you remember all the people that you used to be.

RILEY: And that line really stuck out to me as this idea of like oh we change as life goes on. And like I can transition and it doesn't mean that I wasn't myself before. It just means like I'm putting on this new face that better reflects who I am inside

But the next year, the new Doctor played by Peter Capaldi was having a rough time – which spoke to all of Riley's fears about how her friends would react to her changing. The Doctor's companion Clara couldn't accept that this new Doctor was the same person she had been traveling with. And she was on the verge of leaving him.

THE DOCTOR: You can't see me, can you? You look at me and you can't see me. Do you have any idea what that's like?

RILEY: And the doctor says to Clara like I'm standing right in front of you and you can't see me. Do you know how hard that is just see me and that line made me sob like it is just it was like right to the heart of how I felt.

Eventually, Clara is won over and gives him a hug.

THE DOCTOR: I don't think that I'm a hugging person now.

CLARA: I'm not sure you get a vote.

And here's another example of the show being an inspiration to transgender fans. Again here's Emily Asher-Perrin.

EMILY: I fell in love with my husband who is trans based on our love of watching the show while we were in college.

Kelsey and Emily were roommates at Sarah Lawrence back when Kelsey was identifying as a woman. They fell in love with the show together. It took years for them to admit that they were in love with each other too. Here's Kelsey:

KELSEY: We were one of those people who we were always really annoyed. Everyone's like you're just dating right? And all of our friends were just like why would you hide it why are you lying to us like this is the most liberal welcoming school you could possibly be. And we're like no no we're just friends. But they were right and we were wrong!

Remember the big romance of the modern era is between David Tennant's Tenth Doctor and his companion Rose. Emily felt a profound identification with Rose. And Kelsey wanted to emulate the Tenth Doctor who was wore pinstriped suits, long swishy coats and spiked hair.

KELSEY: I definitely was sporting that same haircut for a while.

You kind of still are.

KELSEY: Yeah, I kind of still am.

In 2010, Emily and Kelsey cosplayed as The Tenth Doctor and Rose at San Diego ComicCon. It was one of the first times Kelsey felt comfortable occupying a male identity in public. And his costume was a huge hit.

KELSEY: And it was all over the Internet for a while and I remember seeing comments on a picture of me and the comment was I don't know if this is a guy or a girl but I'm really into it. I was just like hey yeah like it doesn't it doesn't matter. And I thought like yeah, I can be the doctor. Like not as a costume not as but as you know someone who is a man and sort of has a right to the space and to identifying in that manner.

And did you tell what did Emily say when you told her that this is you know this is how I felt from this experience?

KELSEY: Wen I when I just sort of the picture I was like Isn't this great. She was like that is great that's kind of something you want. And I was like Yeah I think it is.

That conservation can be really hard for some couples. Emily would've reacted the same way whether she was a Doctor Who fan or not. But Doctor Who gave them a language to explore what was going to happen next.

KELSEY: She was like well you know it's kind of like regeneration you know it's kind of like you are 9 and now you're going to become 10 and I'm going to miss nine but ten is sort of who you were always supposed to be. And I was like yeah and someone I could only be because of you.

None of us get to live as long as The Doctor, or get that many second chances at life. But we try our best as we go through time and space at our own speed. And the Doctor is always happiest when he or she accepts

change instead of fighting it. And I feel that way as I keep trying to be a better version of myself. Emily does too.

EMILY: And I think that the Doctor is very much is a perfect cipher for what it means to get older and to constantly have shifting ideas. And that I also think is a really useful thing that the doctor provides people the ability to understand that it's okay to shift and change which I think a lot of people think of as a scary or a bad thing. He's sort of advocating the idea that change is good and that you should want to be different people in your life because that means that you're evolving.

Now the Doctor's companions go through their own regeneration traveling with him. It may not be a literal transformation, but the change is no less profound. In other words: next time on Imaginary Worlds Doctor Who:

MONTAGE FROM NEXT EPISODE

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Nick Randall, Emily Asher-Perrin, Robin Bunce, Kelsey Jefferson Barrett, Mac Rogers, Riley Silverman and Stephanie Billman.

If you're excited about this mini-series, feel free to share it online. Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. You can like Imaginary Worlds on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky. My website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.