

THE LIBRARIAN OF SERAPEA

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Season 34/Story 10A
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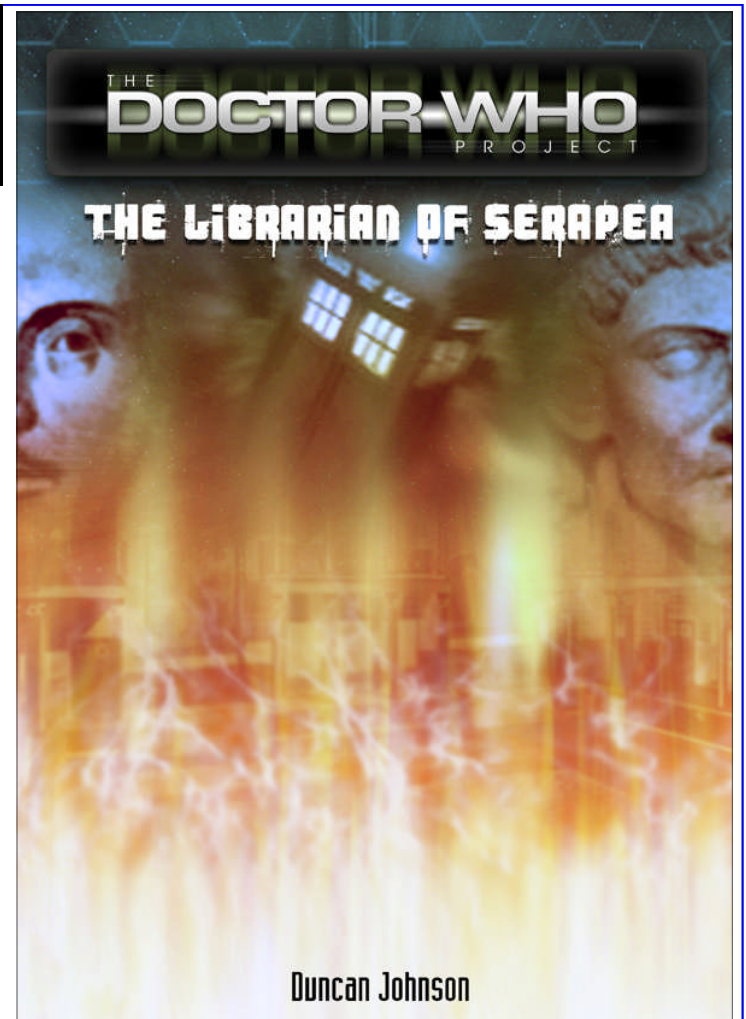
A good evening's reading can involve a number of scenarios, but there's something about an exhilarating historical romp which somehow hits the spot more than most. Duncan Johnson's *The Librarian of Serapea* is a prime example of just such a literary animal. After a mysterious outer space opening the story quickly switches to contemporary London, where the Doctor is intent on showing Silver a musical. This proves to be easier said than done, and in trying to find a good piece of theatre the pair soon find themselves drawn into an historical detective mystery, involving the near legendary *Love's Labour's Won*, a meeting with William Shakespeare, entanglements with Emperors Caligula and Claudius of Ancient Rome, and a trip to the Library of Alexandria.

This act of drawing upon historical events to lend canvas to the story line is achieved in convincing style, indicating a writer who has either a proclivity for historical study or a fondness for researching their chosen narrative. Whichever happens to be case, the result is a chance to view the past through the eyes of an enthusiast, which in terms of penning a good *Doctor Who* story makes for an excellent qualification.

A fine historical romp maybe one half of a good evening's reading but a believable plot line and a decent villain certainly form the other, and in *The Librarian of Serapea* both of these ingredients are present and correct, producing an adventure which persuades the reader to discover what happens next – a fundamental ingredient in good story telling. The plot line is sharp in its simplicity: long lost literary works are being stolen – some of which are being sold off – and the time lines are under threat. The main villain, an unpleasant cephalopod named Oozle, is introduced early on but remains in the wings for the most part, and in a welcome salute to the series' past his accompanying henchmen are revealed to be a very familiar breed of alien.

In *Oozle*, a bubble-enclosed nasty with a penchant for cigars, the reader is presented with a villainous contrast to the simplistic megalomaniac bent on eternal life, and the planet-conquering dominator who should have long since been put out to grass. Instead we are given a money-mad loan shark who, when asked by the Doctor "*When are you going to realise that not everything in life is about money?*" offers the definitive question in reply "*When are you going to realise that all the things that matter are?*" Oozle is the archetypal materialist who is quite prepared to put life and limb – all eight of them – on the line to further his wealth. Given all these attributes perhaps he's a distant relative of a certain Thoros Betan from the classic series?

Not to be outshone by a cigar-smoking octopus, the time



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thief Dexter Dean is a character whose determination to raid the great lost works of history is matched only by his ignorance of loan sharks and his palpable lack of respect for the time lines. As a contrast to Oozle Dexter works well, creating the substance behind the suspense and aptly portraying the final word in time travelling bookworms.

New characters aside, the Ninth Doctor and Silver come across as an authentic Doctor-companion combination. The Time Lord's unsuccessful attempt to take his assistant to a West End musical, for example, echoes many a time when a Doctor tried to give his travelling companion an historical treat and came unstuck. And the scene in which the Doctor and Silver find themselves caught up in the midst of *Romeo*

and Juliet – as Nurse and Juliet respectively – is not only pure comic relief, but also brilliantly reflects their off stage relationship as teacher and pupil.

Throughout the adventure the Doctor and Silver are each afforded their rightful portion of the limelight and, crucially, in a way that demonstrates exactly who they are. In the Ninth Doctor we are presented with a mature and calm incarnation of the maverick Time Lord, who is intent on protecting the time lines; and in Silver we have a teenager who is steadily learning the ropes of time travel, and who is still somewhat naïve over the ins and outs of her new lifestyle (her questioning of the Doctor regarding the purpose of their tracking down the time thief is a good example).

The story's pace is excellent throughout, establishing a steady rhythm which is in step with the reader's own ponderings over what will happen next. The way in which the Doctor and Silver move from one historical backdrop to the

next keeps things rolling along nicely, and the various supporting characters that briefly crop up are well drawn. The balance between description and dialogue is nigh on perfect, and the generally short length of scenes avoids fatiguing the reader.

Duncan Johnson's writing lays out the planks of an intriguing narrative on firm foundations, revealing an author who knows where he is going right from the very first word, and who meticulously unravels his plot a piece at a time. His gradually building climax is timed to perfection, and in its demand for a final and convincing resolution it is not found wanting. As a complete package *The Librarian of Serapea* is an impressive piece of work which succeeds by blending together the essential aspects of a good *Doctor Who* adventure in an innovative fashion, creating a final recipe which is both refreshing and dynamic.

Rating: 9/10