

FIRST BORN

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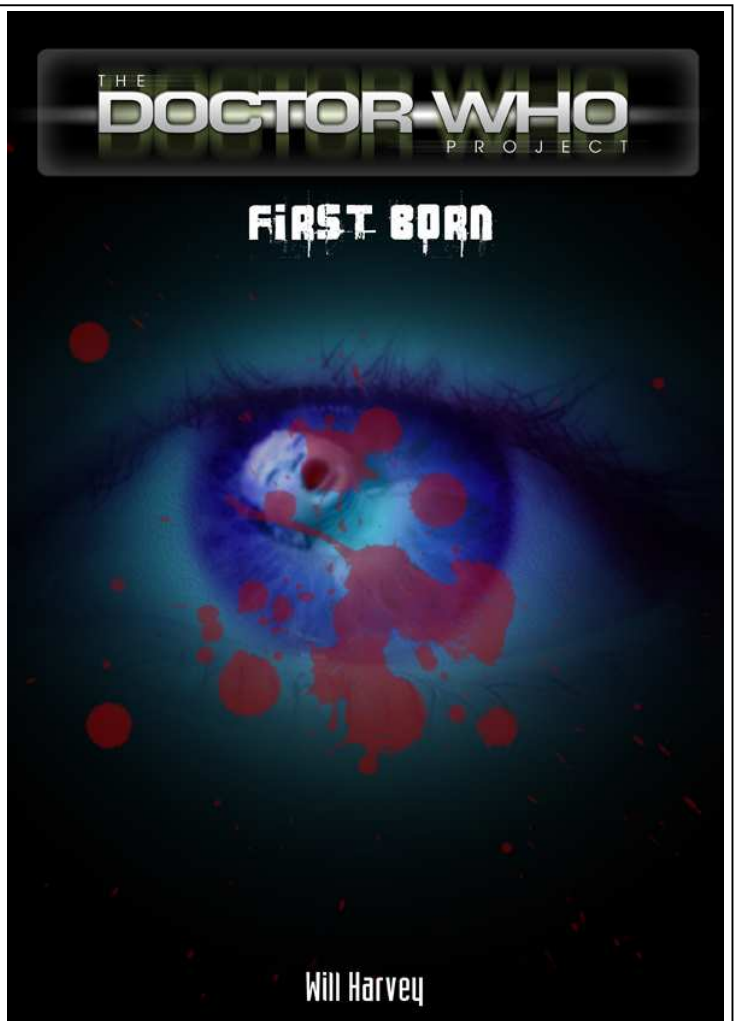
A message from the Doctor's space-time telegraph invites the TARDIS crew to visit a happy event involving an old friend on the planet Anthanaea. The Anthanaeans are a race of immortals, so long, that is, as they remain on their home world, the properties of which lend them a deathless existence. With endless time on their hands the Anthanaeans are slow to accumulate technology. Furthermore, living such uneventful lives makes the arrival of a newborn a major event.

The Doctor's friend is Verinian Osis, whose wife Embrica has just given birth to a baby boy. It soon becomes apparent, however, that there is a distinctly unpleasant twist to the birth of any child on Anthanaea, and, when Silver is informed of the state sanctioned procedure which must follow, it becomes obvious that the Doctor's decision to visit an old friend is not just a case of congratulating the happy parents.

Initially the plot is unpacked at a steady pace which is in synch with the natural speed of events on Anthanaea. As the story unwinds further, however, it picks up an urgency which counterpoints the sudden frenzy of happenings which proceed to grip the normally peaceful and predictable lives of the Anthanaean people. For the reader this change of pace keeps their attention focused, and provides just the sort of narrative gear change which makes for an excellent build up to the plot's climax. With this last point in the mind, the conclusion to Part Three works very well indeed, taking the story along a slightly different path than the one previously followed, and inviting the reader to embark upon a journey, which skirts the boundaries of myth and legend before returning, under the Doctor's careful guidance, to the world of rational explanations.

The deliberately strained dialogue between the Doctor and Silver after arriving on Anthanaea is particularly well written, reflecting the whirl of thoughts in the Doctor's head, to which Silver, in all her open-eyed amazement at visiting an alien world, remains patently blind. In this series of exchanges, which help us picture the Athanaeans and their world, we are invited to observe a race through the perspective of a Time Lord, one who has weighed and measured countless peoples and cultures over the centuries, and who can make a sweeping statement about an entire species sound considered, and more importantly, humble.

Aside from the Doctor and Silver the other main characters



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revolve around Verinian and Embrica on one side, and the figure of Stassinari on the other. Stassinari is an intriguing individual whose quiet, understated demeanour helps to emphasise his dark occupation. In this character we have all the pride of a servant of the state, who performs his duty to the utmost of his ability. Verinian too is a fine creation, given life and believability through the powerful, personal and arguably selfish motive which drives him to rail against his society's codes and principles. In fact, it's easy to take Verinian's side in the argument over Anthanaean population control, despite the much broader and perhaps wiser perspective which the Doctor brings to the table. The way in which Verinian ensnares the Doctor's help is brilliant in its reading of the Time

Lord's ethics, and when the Doctor later observes that he is "...about to collaborate in an attack on this planet's whole way of life" we are made perfectly aware that this is no small matter of saving one man and his child.

Perhaps the most chilling line, however, is left until the closing scene of the story, when Silver points out that "we did all that bad stuff yesterday helping Verinian, all unnatural and unethical, and check it out, the world hasn't ended after all," and the Doctor simply replies "not yet." In that one line we find the true extent of the burden of the Time Lord, one who can interfere, but who knows full well that any tampering on their part could lead to any number of unforeseeable tragedies. In this sense there is no villain in *Firstborn*, save for the self-centred needs of the individual and perhaps the unthinking nature of the state's hired killer.

The Anthanaean culture is made solid and realistic by the careful treatment it receives. Instead of galactic domination or plans to invade the Earth, we are presented with a race of immortals who literally have all the time in the world to live

their unending lives, all of which creates a sort of *mañana* mentality, albeit on a planetary scale.

Will Harvey's examination of this alien culture and its approach to population control is both thorough and rigorous. The way in which he skilfully employs the story's main characters to highlight and explore the various aspects of this thorny debate is spot-on. Moreover, through the reactions of the Doctor and Silver to the various events unfolding around them, the reader is able to consider how they themselves might react to just such a situation.

Capital punishment, population control, the rule of law and the consequences of endless life each vie for the attention of the moral lens in *Firstborn*. It is a tale which teems with ethical dilemmas, allowing the reader to delve into an array of moral layers. In so doing we are invited to assess the problems of immortality from a perspective which is fresh, engaging and above all else a gripping piece of science fiction.

Rating: 9.5/10