

STONE AND CAULDRON

Written by: Jodie van de Wetering
Special Release ▪ Story S6
Reviewed by Jez Strickley

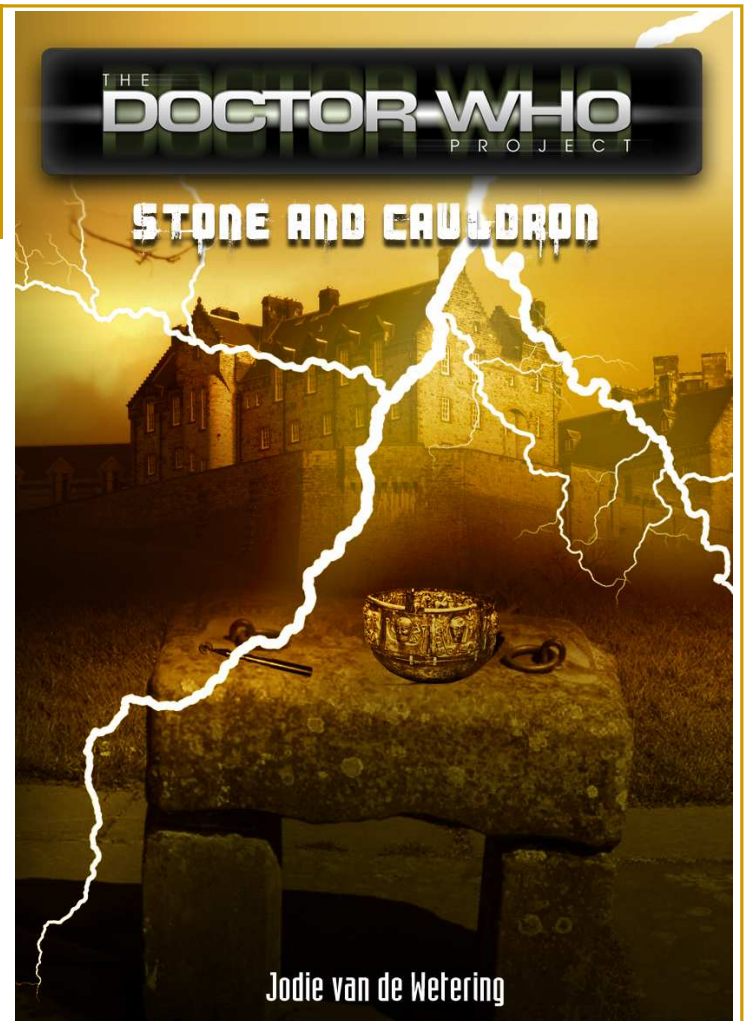
I happen to think that one-off stories, often filed away under the header ‘specials’, are a great addition to any fan fiction series. Their key advantage lies in giving you the complete package without having the buy into an all-conquering story arc or season-long motif. One-off stories which take a look at a dear-departed TARDIS crew are even better. They present us with the opportunity to revisit old friends and enjoy a fresh offering of their adventures.

In *Stone and Cauldron* we get just such an adventure, penned by TDWP veteran Jodie van de Wetering. Episodic in nature, this story sees the welcome return of the sunglasses-obsessed Eighth Doctor, alongside his first two sidekicks Tamara Scott and Grae. Van de Wetering knows her way around this particular TARDIS crew like the back of her hand; and the fluid manner in which she plays to the strengths of each character in turn does the team proud.

Planting the time travellers in the midst of an archaeological dig in modern-day Scotland, the Doctor is initially paired off with long-time friend and archaeologist, Doctor Angus Maloney; whilst Tamara and Grae investigate mysterious energy signatures at Edinburgh Castle. By Part Two the Doctor and Grae are two thousand years back in time and caught up in the pursuit of a pagan time-space portal. Meanwhile, in the present day, Tamara is ‘babysitting’ Doctor Maloney’s second meeting with the head of a local pagan group, Brooke Daley.

Events then begin to steadily build as it appears that the famous Stone of Scone in Edinburgh Castle has a twin, buried and seemingly forgotten until the arrival of Maloney’s dig. Most crucially of all, someone or something is triggering a build-up of energy in these stones – but why?

Unfortunately at this point things begin to drift plot-wise. More, in spite of having all the ingredients for a



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rip-roaring climax, the finale left me with the feeling of a story only part-finished.

Don’t get me wrong, *Stone and Cauldron* presents a well-rounded set of guest characters and some beautiful imagery. Van de Wetering has a fine prose style and her storytelling is set upon firm foundations. Moreover, the characters of Brooke Daley and the pagan priestess Abhainn Beag – seemingly linked according to the climax of the tale – are motivated and intelligently written. But as to the apparent world-bridging qualities of the respective stones, and the

ultimate reason why a power surge is steadily building within them, the reader is left to fathom these points for himself. Baeg's motive – to somehow prevent the loss of her community as foretold to her – is clear enough, but beyond this events seem vague and, for me at least, a little frustrating.

The subplot involving two ill-thinking present-day pagans, Max and Cecily, is another bone of contention. Their antics appear to be leading towards some connection with the mysterious activities of the stones, but as it turns out Max is simply after a fast buck and some needless violence to boot; whilst Cecily is mesmerised by her love for him. Although a perfectly adequate plotline in itself, it is still a touch disappointing to discover that the dark deeds of these miscreants are driven by rather pedestrian reasons.

Judiciously used and skilfully executed, a cliff-hanger can bring an adventure to life. Certainly this is true of *Stone and Cauldron* in regard to its first cliff-hanger. However, an almost carbon-copy climax to Part Two; and a rather tired finish to Part Three (given Tamara's hand-to-hand expertise we're not left in a great deal of suspense by her being threatened by a knife) warns the reader that the ending may not be all that special.

To be frank, however, the finish is more muddling than anything else. Baeg's apparent sacrifice, along

with her lover Oenghis, leaves us wondering what precisely has happened to the priestess. Has she really died or simply vanished into another world? Still further, has she somehow possessed the body of Brooke Daley? And if she can kill off one body in exchange for another, what exactly is she? Lots of questions, and not too many answers.

By leaving the whole mystery up in the air, as it were, the conclusion that the plot gets lost along the way is difficult to deny. This is a shame, since there is much to be recommended about the Stone and Cauldron. The way in which the issue of pagan beliefs versus the modern world is expounded upon through the viewpoint of Brooke Daley, for example, is both nuanced and considered.

The blurb for *Stone and Cauldron* refers to “a woman, a man, a stone and a problem” but at the finish the precise nature of this problem remains to be seen. Rapidly rising energy spikes – possibly warning of an opening between worlds – and a group of contemporary pagans somehow fuelling this energy, have the makings of an excellent tale. But somehow the whole doesn't match up to the sum of its parts.

If you're a fan of TDWP's Eighth Doctor/Tamara/Grae TARDIS crew you'll certainly enjoy revisiting their interactions, which are deftly written, in *Stone and Cauldron*. As a story in itself, however, it doesn't have quite the edge it promises. **7/10**