

My Review of THE ANCESTOR CELL, by Lawrence Miles.

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Dear God, where do I start? With a disclaimer, possibly. The trouble is, I've got an obvious vested interest here. THE ANCESTOR CELL's on my patch. It is, on the whole, a book designed to remove from the continuity everything I've ever invented. I mean, I'd hate anyone to think I'm *prejudiced*. So maybe I'd better explain that, for many years, my relationship with Stephen Cole has been one of constant play-fighting: this is a man who, when he was still my editor, I used to address with letters headed Dear Chimp-Lips". I knew, right from the start, that he wouldn't take the slightest bit of notice of any of "my" ideas on how this part of the series' history should turn out." But the problem with THE ANCESTOR CELL isn't that it messes up anything *I* might have thought of. The problem with THE ANCESTOR CELL is that it's shit. It's dull, it's stupid, it's badly-written, and it's got a plot that makes virtually no sense at all, a bunch of loose ends roughly tied into the shape of a book with a couple of crowd-pleasing set-pieces so randomly thrown into the mix that, in retrospect, there's almost a kind of shame in having read it. Interesting, then, how *all* the positive feedback to the book has revolved around the apocalyptic ending: as with EARTHSHOCK, the big climax seems wilfully designed to draw the attention away from the fact that the story leading up to it is entirely meaningless. The real problem here, beyond all the laughable attempts at tying up every loose end in sight (whether they need tying up or not), is that the book's tragically, crashingly banal. It's a novel which seriously believes itself to be a world-shaking, cataclysmic epic, but which in its middle act" largely consists of drab Time Lord supporting characters running up and down corridors being chased by spiders, combined with exposition scenes so massively over-inflated that they make Julia Sawalha's arse look small. What we've basically got is THE INFINITY DOCTORS with all the good bits missing, a desperate attempt to do something big and important which can't tell the difference between "epic" and "just happens to be set on Gallifrey"." Gallifrey. That's as good a place to begin the dissection as any. Gallifrey's always been a touchy area. In THE WAR GAMES it's something huge and significant, a place of unimaginable power and influence, a perfect mythic core" to a perfect mythic universe. In THE DEADLY ASSASSIN Robert Holmes spoils things slightly by setting it out as an "ordinary" society, but at least he's got the grace to do it with some degree of majesty. Later Terrance Dicks works do a pretty good job devaluing the Gallifrey myth, turning it into just another hi-tech planet full of people with funny one-syllable names, but THE ANCESTOR CELL goes to astonishing new lengths in ripping the guts out of the mythos and removing anything that might possibly have been interesting about the place. The Gallifreyan sequences open with a clique of bored rich kids dabbling in the black arts, and it's impossible to adequately describe the crushing *wrongness* of all this as a plot device. Even apart from the fact that the "bored rich kids" routine is one of the biggest clich+»-+-+s in modern fantasy fiction... even apart from the fact that, for a storyline that's supposed to bring the series to the point of apocalypse, it's hideously mundane and inappropriate... even apart from all that, at what point did Gallifrey acquire a capitalist economy, exactly? A race of hyper-scientists who can casually engineer stars, who can access any point in time and have nigh-infinite resources at their disposal, suddenly turn out to be bothered by money worries and keep running out of funds, just like every other shite bunch of humanoids in the universe. Even at its worst i.e. THE EIGHT DOCTORS), the crass Dicks version never went this far. The legend has been taken to pieces and pissed on by authors who

don't even have the slightest imaginative thing to add to the mythology, and when the planet finally detonates the only possible reaction is to breathe a sigh of relief that nobody can do anything worse with it. Along with DIVIDED LOYALTIES - and at the end of the day, THE ANCESTOR CELL is to the EDAs what DIVIDED LOYALTIES is to the PDAs - this is as low as the mythos can sink." And then there's the Enemy. Oh, Christ, yes. Now, let me reiterate this, because I don't want anyone thinking I'm bringing my own agenda into things again. I knew, right from the start, that THE ANCESTOR CELL would thoroughly ignore any of my own ideas about who the Enemy are and what they're trying to do. Not a problem. But *this*... it's not that the answer's wrong", it's that the answer's so fucking stupid, so breathtakingly pointless. The Enemy, we learn, are a bunch of proto-life urges from the dawn of time which have been hanging around unseen for aeons soaking up TARDIS energy, but which can only finally manifest themselves when the Time Lords drop a Klein-bottle-cum-bottled-universe into the space-time vortex, wherein the energies of the bottle leak throughout the continuum until the Doctor's re-forming TARDIS can assemble itself around a raw seam of the leakage and give the proto-life urges physical purchase on the universe, at which point they immediately begin to attack Gallifrey. Well, who'd have thought it? After all the hype, after all the build-up, it turns out that the Time Lords are being menaced by three pages of meaningless technobabble. If the authors had claimed that the Enemy were a bunch of intelligent monkeys, it would have made more sense than this. Never mind *my* agenda: if I were a reader, the crushing, devastating disappointment of this ludicrous, farcical, embarrassing cop-out would have made me give up on the series in a second. But the sheer banality of it all - that what's supposed to be an earth-shaking revelation turns out to be an awkward mish-mash of pseudo-science - pretty much sums up the whole messy, confused affair. (I could also point out that the universe-in-a-bottle clearly *isn't* a Klein bottle, and that the only thing it's got in common with a Klein bottle is the word "bottle", but why bother nitpicking when the entire thing's so obviously fucked?) It's incredible to think that the authors could possibly have topped this level of stupidity, except maybe by revealing the Doctor's real name and claiming that it's Fred", or by having his father turn up and reveal himself to be Rassilon (both on the same wavelength of mindless banality), but somehow they manage it when Grandfather Paradox turns up and - hey, guess what? - it's a future version of the Doctor! Well, fuck me. Again, sod the fact that it's obviously not true, just concentrate on the mediocrity of it all. If *anyone* can give me a plot idea more crass and predictable than this, I'll literally give them money. And once you've accepted that he's just the Valeyard with a new haircut, the Grandfather - despite being a projection of a future (and thus more experienced) Doctor - turns out to be so dense that the Doctor proper can out-think him at almost about every turn. Cole's claim that neither the Enemy nor the Grandfather are "definite" answers (the book leaves a 1% chance of ambiguity in both cases) doesn't change the fact that THE ANCESTOR CELL is peddling fifth-rate ideas. Not a shred of creativity has gone into any of this mess. And when it comes down to it... seeing as it's a fan-fic staple, with a pedigree going back twenty years or more, is the destruction of Gallifrey really such a great twist? Or is it exactly what you'd *expect* a desperate writer to do if he had the task of coming up with something "big" to finish off the series? Because, let's face it, if THE ANCESTOR CELL were fan-fiction then nobody would ever be able to take it seriously." (I could continue in this vein, but if I were to point out the truly dire use of Faction Paradox - which loses every aspect of its culture that ever made it interesting, and turns into a collection of God-awful Scooby Doo villains who dress up in hooded robes and hang around laughing in deep boomy voices - I'd be accused of self-interest again. All I'd like to add on the Faction front is that in ALIEN BODIES and INTERFERENCE the Faction never once kills anybody, the closest it ever comes being the ritual suicide of one of its own members. Now all of a sudden it's a dull and witless military operation, which runs around the place slaughtering everything in sight and plotting to take over the universe just like every other piss-poor bunch of no-hopers in the continuity. When did these people turn evil, I wonder? Evil" rather than "dissenting", that is. Maybe they experienced one moment of true happiness, or just got a good shag, or something.)" There are good moments, it's true, but pitifully few of them, and even these suffer in the context of a hopelessly muddled and fundamentally trite storyline. The Doctor's final statement to Grandfather Paradox - that the Grandfather cut off his

own arm because it was the hand that did this" (cue the destruction of Gallifrey) - is in itself a moment of high drama, but falls to pieces as soon as you notice that (a) like the rest of the story it makes no sense at all, as by the book's own logic a timeline in which Gallifrey is destroyed can't possibly have produced the Grandfather, and (b) it only focuses attention on the fact that the destruction of Gallifrey is ultimately caused by the Doctor pulling a big lever. You know those shite computers in old SF serials that have "self-destruct" buttons stuck right at the front of the casing? It's like that, really." It doesn't make sense. *None* of it makes sense. From the laughable opening (with Fitz suddenly talking about a hatred of wasps for no good reason halfway through a life-or-death struggle with Romana's war-TARDISes) to the ridiculous ending (the amnesiac Doctor needs a hundred years alone with the recovering TARDIS, so his closest friends decide to abandon him on a hostile pre-alien-contact Earth with nobody watching over him before sodding off out of his life), it's singularly inept, and singularly *wrong*, in almost every detail. On a more personal note, for months now I've been telling myself that I'm not going to bother reading any more DOCTOR WHO books from hereon in (it's all getting a bit much, and THE ANCESTOR CELL seemed as good a place to stop as any), so in the final analysis I feel almost grateful that the authors have made it so easy for me to give up. After this, it all seems so worthless. So completely futile. It's predictable. It's moronic. It's pointless. And in these respects, it's the perfect way of rounding off the Eighth Doctor series. And Peter Anghelides gave me a free copy. And I sincerely hope he doesn't read this.

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