

Anthony Read obituary

Author, television screenwriter and producer who worked on Doctor Who, Z Cars, The Professionals and The Omega Factor

Toby Hadoke

Monday 30 November 2015 15.32 GMT

Anthony Read, who has died aged 80, was a writer and television producer who in 1977 chose to be, in effect, demoted, in order to spend a year working as script editor during Tom Baker's years in Doctor Who. When he joined the BBC in November 1963 Read had noticed the show's very first instalments being recorded in one of the studios. By the 1970s, he was a seasoned writer and producer of drama, and was reluctant to accept a post offered to him as script editor - until told which series he was being asked to join. Read's vast experience, calm demeanour and forensic aptitude for structuring scripts provided essential ballast for the Doctor Who producer Graham Williams. When one script fell through at the last minute, together they hurriedly wrote the season climax, conceiving The Invasion of Time (1978) set on the Doctor's home planet, Gallifrey.

Read also helped to develop the first television script from Douglas Adams, whose four-episode Doctor Who story Pirate Planet (1978) was at first deemed too complex by the BBC's head of serials Graeme MacDonald. Read and the director Pennant Roberts felt that Adams was a talent worth backing and so fought for it to remain in production. They won, and helped to structure Adams's wild ideas into a coherent narrative.

The adventure became part of the first season of the show to utilise an umbrella theme: in an unusual move, Read and Williams decided to link the individual stories with a framing narrative concerning the Doctor's search for the Key to Time, a futuristic plot device aimed at restoring balance to the universe. After Read left the show (having installed Adams as his successor as script editor), he contributed an adventure entitled The Horns of Nimon (1979), which was based on the Minotaur myth.

Read was born in Cheslyn Hay, a small mining village in Staffordshire. His father, Frederick, a miner, died in the pit when Anthony was seven, leaving his mother, Lottie, to bring him up alone. He was educated at Queen Mary's grammar school in Walsall, which had a strong theatrical tradition, and then enrolled at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London. National service interrupted his studies and after demobilisation he set up a theatre company with the actor Ian Hendry and toured eastern Europe as a fledgling actor-manager, taking lead roles or manning the tills, as necessary, often both on the same night.

Realising that he was not cut out for acting, he headed to Fleet Street, aiming for work in advertising copywriting while submitting scripts to television companies. He was eventually asked to join the BBC, where he became a protege of the innovative head of drama Sydney Newman, adapting stories, writing original scripts and serving as story editor for series such as *Detective* (1964, starring Rupert Davies), *The Indian Tales of Rudyard Kipling* (1964) and *Sherlock Holmes* (1965, starring Douglas Wilmer).

From 1965 he script-edited *Mogul* (later entitled *The Troubleshooters*), a drama about the oil industry starring Geoffrey Keen, also producing it from 1966, and in 1972 *The Lotus Eaters* (featuring his friend Hendry). In 1980 he script-edited the 13 one-off thrillers in the *Hammer House of Horror* series.

Among more than 200 television writing credits were *Z Cars* (1976-77), *The Professionals* (1977-80), *The Omega Factor* (1979), *Sapphire and Steel* (1981), the zoo vet series *One By One* (1984-85) and the New Zealand-based teen drama *The Tribe* (1999).

His proudest small-screen achievements were *Chocky* (1984), a six-part adaptation of a John Wyndham novel about a boy befriending an extraterrestrial, for which he conceived two original sequels; and the award-winning *The Baker Street Boys* (1983), about a group of urchins who assist Sherlock Holmes. Between 2005 and 2009 Read wrote six well received and widely translated novels based around the Baker Street characters.

He had other major successes in print, largely as a writer of historical non-fiction. *Kristallnacht: Unleashing the Holocaust* won the Wingate literary prize in 1989. Other works (some co-written with a former Doctor Who colleague, David Fisher) included *Operation Lucy: The Most Secret Spy Ring of the Second World War* (1980), *Colonel Z: the Secret Lives of a*

Master of Spies (1984), *The Deadly Embrace: Hitler, Stalin and the Nazi-Soviet Pact 1939-1941* (1988) and *The Proudest Day: India's Long Road to Independence* (1997).

Read was an active member of the Writers' Guild, serving as chair between 1981 and 1982, and drawing up an industry-wide code of practice on behalf of the young writers he was committed to nurturing, never taking pay or expenses for his work on the guild's behalf. He was also a director of the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society. He co-wrote a proposal from the Writers' Guild and the Directors and Producers Association that was submitted to the Annan committee on the future of broadcasting and was subsequently used as part of the charter agreement for establishing Channel 4.

He is survived by his wife, Rosemary (nee Kirby), whom he married in 1958, and their two daughters.

• Anthony Read, writer, editor and producer, born 21 April 1935; died 21 November 2015

More obituaries

Topics

Television

Doctor Who

BBC

Theatre

Save for later Article saved

Reuse this content