

Doctor by Doctor: Dr. Philip Boyce and Dr. Mark Piper in Star Trek...

by Victor Grech

Doctors in science fiction are usually important protagonists or supporting actors. Numerous television series, including *Stargate SG-1*, *Firefly*, *Stargate: Atlantis*, *Torchwood*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Babylon 5* have included doctors who play important roles (table 1), and the majority of these medics are depicted as human, complete with foibles and failings.

Several SF book series also deliberately concentrate on doctors, such as Leinster's famous *Med Ship* series, which feature "Med Ship Men," volunteer doctors similar to *Médecins Sans Frontières International* who travel from world to world with no actual enforcement powers but are so respected that their medical advice is strictly adhered to. Other series include Viehl's *Stardoc* series which depicts the treatment of various different alien life-forms in *Sector General* trope.

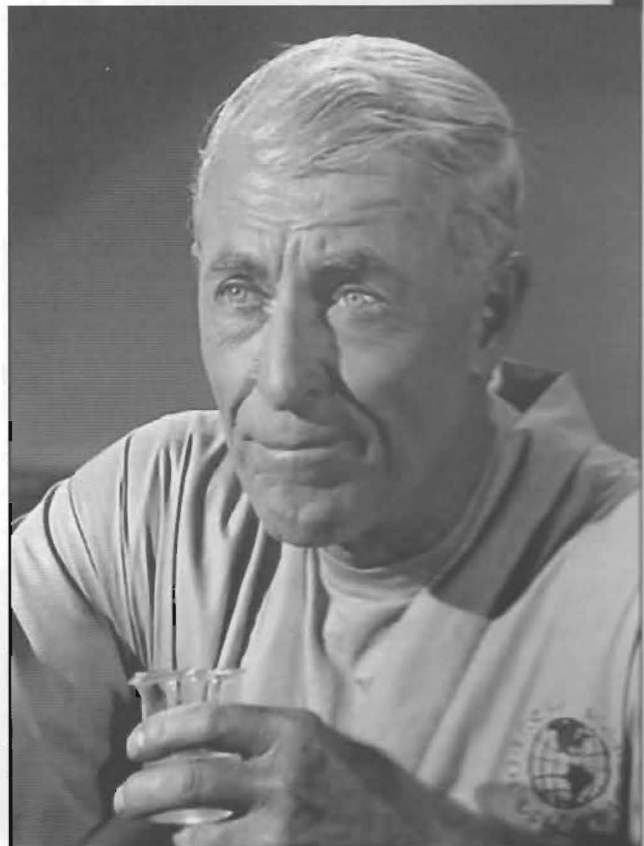
Comic books have also depicted heroic doctors, such as Dr. Pieter Cross who dons the mantle of "Doctor Midnite" (Reizestein and Aschmeier), Dr. Thomas Elliot who is also "Hush" (Loeb and Lee) and Dr. Donald Blake, Thor's original alter ego (Loeb and Lee).

Moreover, doctors have been heroic protagonists in several novels, such as McIntyre's "Dreamsnake" which depicts a female healer in a dystopian, post-nuclear apocalyptic world. SF seemingly fills all niches, and has also depicted Mills and Boon type medical space romances, with attractive nurses and handsome doctors (Webb).

Doctors in *Star Trek* have been crucial to the series. This essay will provide an analysis of Drs. Boyce and Piper who each appeared in one *Star Trek* episode, from the viewpoint of a practicing doctor. Since they each only appeared once, non-canon sources detailing their lives in the *Star Trek* universe have also been sought.

Dr. Philip Boyce

The fictional Dr. Boyce was born and educated in the city of New York in the 23rd century. He decided to pursue medicine at the age of fifteen and support himself in medical school by writing. His works proved popular although he declined offers to tour starships. Boyce initially practiced pediatrics in Manhattan, but all this proved unchallenging, and the novel diseases described in *The Journal of Space Medicine* prompted him to join Starfleet (Greenberger).



Enlistment led to some interesting experiences, and for example some time during the 2240s, Boyce led a medical team that attempted to find a cure for “Dezzla’s disease” on the planet Argelius (Stern). Boyce was assigned to the Starship *Enterprise* as assistant Chief Medical Officer for its first five-year mission (2246-2251) under Dr. Sarah Poole-April, and was promoted to Chief when the incumbent moved on in 2251, under Captain Pike, to 2264 (Oltion).

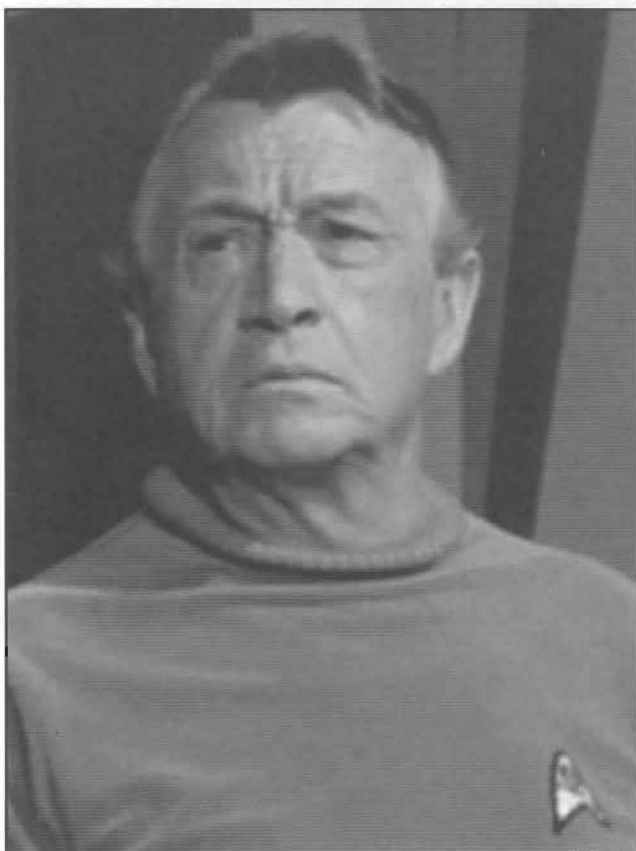
Boyce appeared as the main protagonist in several other narratives (Abnett), and on leaving the *Enterprise* (Barr), he retired to a teaching job at Starfleet Medical Academy (Greenberger). Boyce only appeared in one television episode, in a role reprised by John Hoyt (1905-91).

This episode (“The Cage”) was the *Star Trek* original series pilot. While it was completed in early 1965, it was used in the two-part episode “The Menagerie” (Daniels and Butler 1966) and was first broadcast on TV in its original form in 1988 (Butler).

Television episode

In the episode, Boyce is called to Captain Pike’s cabin on board the *Enterprise*. He shows up with a bag from which he proceeds to concoct a martini. When Pike asks him why he is mixing him a drink, Boyce replies that “sometimes a man’ll tell his bartender things he’ll never tell his doctor,” and proceeds to ask him how he is bearing up after a recent incident on the planet Rigel Seven where three *Enterprise* crewmen died and another seven were injured.

Pike blames himself for this debacle, but Boyce points out that Pike sets “standards no one could meet. You treat everyone on board like a human being except yourself, and now you’re tired.” Boyce then cynically questions



Pike’s proposal to leave Starfleet and settle down on Earth, knowingly stating: “not for you. A man either lives life as it happens to him, meets it head-on, and licks it, or he turns his back on it and starts to wither away (...) take your choice. We both get the same two kinds of customers. The living and the dying.”

This private conversation reflects two aspects to Boyce’s character: an intimate and cordial relationship with his captain and an application of his psychological training in an attempt to help Pike come to terms with his traumas, roles that are repeatedly re-enacted in doctor-captain relationships in *Star Trek*.

Boyce, a member of the medical profession, is expected to give clear and succinct reports. After reviewing the health of a group of colonists, his report to Pike is: “Their health is excellent. Almost too good,” paving the way for the discovery that most of what is witnessed on the planet’s surface (including said colonists) is just an illusion projected by a race of extremely powerful telepaths (Talosians): “Their power of illusion is so great, we can’t be sure of anything we do, anything we see.”

Boyce also joins the *Enterprise*’s science officer (Spock) and executive officer (Number One), both scientists, in illuminating the starship’s situation, further amplifying that ...

it was a perfect illusion. They had us seeing just what we wanted to see, human beings who’d survived with dignity and bravery, everything entirely logical, right down to the building of the camp, the tattered clothing, everything. Now let’s be sure we understand the danger of this. The inhabitants of this planet can read our minds. They can create illusions out of a person’s own thoughts, memories, and experiences, even out of a person’s own desires. Illusions just as real and solid as this table top and just as impossible to ignore.

Like much of SF, *Star Trek* is formulaic in that narratives are almost invariably close-ended with happy endings. Hence Boyce participates in the final exchange, remarking to Captain Pike that he looks “a hundred percent better.” And when Boyce discovers that a pretty, young female crewperson is called “Eve as in Adam,” Pike sardonically remarks that “all ship’s doctors are dirty old men.”

Dr. Mark Piper

As explained earlier, the first *Star Trek* pilot episode was initially rejected by the network, and a second pilot was commissioned and paid for by NBC (Whitfield), called “Where No Man Has Gone Before” (1966). After the first pilot, Boyce left the series and Piper acted in this episode on the personal recommendation of the director to Gene Roddenberry, the show’s creator (Solow 84). This decision was precipitated by a discussion between the director and Roddenberry that concluded that the Chief Medical Officer should be typecast as an old country doctor (Asherman 118).

Like Boyce, Piper also appeared in solely one episode and the role was reprised by the actor Paul Fix (1901-83), following which the role of Chief Medical Officer was filled by Dr. Leonard McCoy for reasons that will be explained later.

Piper (2191-2271) was born in New England and was interested in medicine from childhood. He entered medical school some time in the 2210s and not only joined Starfleet, but also married and raised a family of five children (Friedman). Piper acquired many honors during his career, but was tragically murdered in 2271 by a group of traitors within Starfleet (Graf).

An NBC series booklet from early 1966 gave the following resume:

Chief Medical Officer Dr. Piper is the oldest and most experienced space traveller aboard the Enterprise. As head of the ship's Medical Department, Piper is responsible for the mental and physical health of the crew. His evaluation of the reaction of the men to the pressures of the intergalactic space travel and the strange flora and fauna encountered on the planets visited will have a vital bearing on the conduct of each mission (Solow).

Television episode

In the episode, Piper acts solely as a supporting actor but is given great responsibilities by Captain Kirk. Piper's first lines are a simple introduction of another doctor, a young and beautiful woman: "Life sciences ready, sir. This is Doctor Dehner, who joined the ship at the Aldebaran colony" (Goldstone).

The *Enterprise* sets off on an exploratory expedition to the galaxy's rim and has a near-disastrous encounter with an exotic energy field. Dr. Dehner and one of Kirk's best friends, Lieutenant Gary Mitchell, both have latent extra-sensory powers, are affected by the field, and begin to manifest increasingly and exponentially more powerful psychokinetic abilities, along with godlike powers of creation, with Mitchell eventually viewing humanity with escalating disparagement and outright contempt.

Piper's next three lines, interspersed in the script, are entirely in keeping with his role as a doctor and scientist, exhibiting crisp clarity:

"The only fact we have for sure is that the S.S. Valiant was destroyed."

"He's alive. Appears to be in shock."

"Perfect, perfect. I've never had a patient like you, Gary. Even the healthiest are generally off on some reading."

Piper next explains to Kirk that Mitchell escaped from custody, and tells him that Mitchell was last seen, "headed across the valley, to the left of the pointed peaks. There's flatlands beyond."

Kirk sets out to stop Mitchell and instructs Piper: "if you have not received a signal from me within twelve hours, you'll proceed at maximum warp to the nearest

Earth base with my recommendation that this entire planet be subjected to a lethal concentration of neutron radiation. No protest on this, Mark. That's an order." Piper does not feature further in the episode as Mitchell is killed during a fight with Kirk.

Discussion

Roddenberry remained discontented with the medical officer's depiction (Solow 84). He "wanted a somewhat younger, more active doctor. He didn't want an aging Solon, he wanted definitely a younger, more vigorous doctor" (Paramount).

The writer Peebles was also unsatisfied with Fix as in his opinion:

he was a little too old for the part (...) he wasn't right (...) the physical element (...) required every crewman of the USS Enterprise to be active. He had to be not only mentally alert, but the traditional images of a country doctor would hardly have fit the images of a man who would say, 'We've got an unknown disease, and there's a cure on this planet. Our only choice is to try it. It might kill you,' and I don't think Paul Fix's interpretation of the character would have been able to do that (Asherman 118).

The interviewer Asherman also felt that Fix played the role in an old-fashioned and "distinctly twentieth century" way (118). It was for these reasons that the role was given to DeForest Kelley (Dr. Leonard McCoy), who Roddenberry had wanted to cast in this part since working on the very first pilot (Solow 75, 84).

Rodenberry's initial notion of Boyce was as:

[a]n unlikely space traveler. At the age of fifty-one, he's worldly, humorously cynical, makes it a point to thoroughly enjoy his own weaknesses. [The captain's] only real confidant, (...) considers himself the only realist aboard, measures each new landing in terms of relative annoyance, rather than excitement (Rodenberry 7).

The doctor segued into "a highly unlikely looking space crewman, (...) pushing middle age, something of a worldly cynic" (Whitfield and Roddenberry 24) a particular characteristic that is shared by doctors in the original *Star Trek* series. Indeed, curmudgeonly country doctors are the norm in this series, through a total of three iterations of actors, including Dr. McCoy.

Doctors are expected to be interdisciplinarians, in that both Boyce and Piper hint at capacities which exceed their medical training, tropes that are expanded by other doctors in the franchise as well as SF in general (Grech "Interdisciplinarity"). Spaceship medics are expected to be able to deal with all biological conditions, from alien and exotic diseases to telepathic and super-paranormal powers, as evidenced in both episodes.

The doctors' humanity is most clearly portrayed in their relationships to their captains, where they act not only to preserve the health of the most vital crewmember



on the starship, but also, through the forging of strong links of friendship, act as psychological counselors. Indeed, it is later shown in this and in subsequent *Star Trek* series that the chief medical officers on Starfleet vessels have the right and duty to suspend captains from command if the physical or mental condition of their captain could be detrimental to the ship or its crew. These series also show that ship's doctors therefore routinely evaluate all crewmembers, including the captain, for fitness for duty in physical and mental assessments, since prevention is superior to cure.

The commonest trope that emerges from these narratives is that of the cautionary tale, that excessive and Frankensteinian desire to wrest nature's secrets, as opposed to the Promethian yearning for knowledge that commences with noble intentions. Both such leanings ignore potential catastrophic outcomes, with deplorable hubris being met with tragedy.

FIN.

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