

Roger Parkes (Scriptwriter).

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Roger Parkes contributed a total of five scripts for Survivors, spanning the second and third series. Roger is a magistrate, and still writes from his home in Berkshire.

How did Roger start out on a career of writing for television? "I graduated in agriculture and then got a job taking race-horses out to Cape Town on a Castle Line boat. I travelled around Africa for about six months with a view to farming out there. I had always been very keen on writing, and while I was in Africa I used to take copious notes and gradually I started to write more and more. I soon realised that I was becoming less and less inclined towards farming. When I returned to England I got a job as an agricultural journalist which led to my becoming a foreign correspondent for The Daily Express and within about four years I had become editor of the paper. I was writing fiction during all this time and I then left journalism and became a story editor at the BBC which I did for six years. This was much more of an education for me and I learned how to write for television during that time. In those days the BBC took you as a trainee story editor for six months, and I trained on all sorts of things such as The Flying Swan. That was a really solid grounding. My first commission to write commercially was for The Prisoner which I got while I was still working for the BBC. Subsequently I wrote for Man in a Suitcase and The Strange Report which were for the American television companies NBC and ABC. Those companies came over here to use the cheap facilities at Pinewood Studios. For me, having up to that point been only a lowly story editor, this was a great breakthrough. I then did science-fiction plays for Out of the Unknown which were quite successful. I left after about six years and there followed a long fallow period when I couldn't get anything on the BBC but I did write for ITV quite a lot, things like Six Days of Justice and some of their afternoon programmes. I later on wrote for Warship, Doomwatch, then Survivors and Blake's 7."

Is writing for television today very different from how it was in the 1970's? "It is very different. One very graphic difference is The Bill, which I've also written for. An episode will run out at one hundred and twenty pages and is twenty five minutes long, whereas an episode of Z Cars which ran for fifty minutes also went to one hundred and twenty pages. That represents the fact that today you do not write a scene of more than a minute and a half for a fast moving police series. The whole pace of production is much faster nowadays. An old hand like me would say that twenty years ago we got much more depth out of the characters than the superficiality of today. If you want to write a long scene nowadays you'd have to chop it up into many segments and intervene it with other things."

What qualities are required of the writer for series such as Doomwatch, Survivors and Blake's 7 ? "As I've already said, I had a background in agriculture which was scientific in origin. In fact, Tessa, my wife, is a science teacher, my brother is a psychiatrist. I had always been interested in science but I have to admit that I had never read any sci-fi at all, my reading was much more catholic. Survivors was not of course sci-fi, it was more anthropological and sociological. I think that you needed two things when writing for the aforesaid series. First you needed to be interested and fascinated by people and the things which brought them into conflict, passion and life. In other words you needed to be a drama writer. In addition you needed the scientific interest which would inspire you to find plots which were different and acceptable. I had this rather pedantic view that the writer should not cheat. I certainly took it all very seriously and I think this appealed to Terry Dudley who was a deeply serious man himself. I remember that he and I used to have some quite deep discussions."

Both Roger and Martin Worth were brought into Survivors at the beginning of the second series. Did Roger follow the first series ? "No, I'm afraid to say that I've very rarely watched any of the programmes I've written for! I didn't even see one of my episodes when it was transmitted."

Does Roger have any strong recollections of the stories he wrote? "Yes, I do. My approach was always to find something outside their settled community. My agricultural background was obviously very useful to Terry (as in the second series story New Arrivals) and there was a certain two-way pull as to whether we used that or went outside the community to find things. One of my episodes, The Peacemaker, was centred around an old windmill . We used a windmill in Norfolk for this story. There was no electricity and so power could be harnessed by the mill. That I think was very effective. One of the reasons the episode was called The Peacemaker was because the man in fact had a pace-maker. Another story I remember very well was The Chosen, starring the Welsh actor Philip Madoc, who was really excellent. He led a fascist community living by a code of eugenics in an old army camp. The story was inspired by a famous book called The Biological Time-bomb written by a scientific journalist Terence Ratray. It was an extraordinary and very imaginative piece of scientific writing which drew from all sorts of things like eugenics, cryogenics, genetic engineering and indeed the whole spectrum of science. Any writer for series

such as Doomwatch, Survivors or Blake's 7 should read this book. The amount of ideas in the book are quite mind-blowing. He even discussed, for example, the use of animal organs in human beings.

"The story of Survivors, as a microcosm of society, was fascinating. There were all the day to day problems of living without electricity and fuel which are romantic, but there are also the issues of government, and we got quite deeply into 'What should Charles be doing now?'. He had beaten the challenge of surviving against Nature and the challenge of surviving in small communities and had fended off the risk of total anarchy which was latent in the first series. Having reached the third series of Survivors, we had to ask what he ought to be doing. Would he be going into central government as opposed to local community government? These were very vexed issues and in a sense were terminal to the series because if you went down that road too far you had to finish. Sparks is the third series episode that I never got to see. This story had a community living in a church where there were dead pigs hung over the altar. This profound symbolism upset my psychiatrist brother enormously!"

The third series sees the survivors leaving their base at Callow Hill and seeking out and linking up with settled communities elsewhere. Does Roger believe that the change back to a wanderer format was necessary? "Staying at Callow Hill would have been extremely limiting. Although on the farm we had the interaction between the individual members of the community and the challenge of farming, you had to gradually widen out. This was absolutely essential as otherwise there would have been no evolution. So moving out from base in the third series provided the opportunity of exploring settled communities elsewhere. It is true that by this time we were beginning to run out of stories. It becomes more and more difficult to sustain a series in a credible way if it wasn't to become a soap like Coronation Street."

Does Roger have a particular favourite episode? "The Chosen, I think. Philip Madoc gave such a wonderful performance."

How long does it take Roger to develop a script and complete the final version? "Once the basic idea had been worked out and agreed with Terry Dudley, which might take perhaps a week, the script would take up to two weeks maximum to do. In those days I used to work very intensely indeed."

One of the criticisms levelled against the series is that it became too cosy, rather like Emmerdale. It was also accused of being too middle-class. How does Roger feel about these criticisms? "I think that if there is any truth to these criticisms then they must be laid partly at Terry Dudley's door. It is really the producer's responsibility to guard against that and Terry was very fundamentally middle class. Personally I have no political statements to make at all, I'm in the business of entertaining. Cosiness is almost endemic in any television series, because actors want to be loved and no matter how villainous you make them initially they nearly always, because of the way they play things, seem to invite if not love then forgiveness. It is therefore almost inevitable that this softening happens."

Was Roger aware of any plans to do a fourth series of Survivors? "Yes, I'm sure that we had talked about it with Terry. I vividly remember the discussions about going into central government more and bringing the communities together, but I seem to recall that it was felt that this idea probably wasn't going to be pragmatic in terms of production costs and so on. At that time I was very busy with other things, so one wasn't in the business of dwelling on these things. Decisions were made by faceless bureaucrats somewhere."

Does Roger feel that there would be a place for Survivors today? "Yes, I do, absolutely! I also feel that there is a place for Doomwatch as well. I'm actually working on a children's series at the moment. It is set 150 years hence in a world that has not only been decimated population-wise but is stricken by a sterility virus and has become a world of women! The series, which has strong elements of comedy, involves a couple of boys of today. The mother of one of them is a professor working on space travel and had developed hibernation to a high degree. They end up in hibernation for 150 years and find themselves being revived by all these women! They come into a very different society indeed. You can imagine what their reaction to all this might be! The series is very much a mirror for today's society and should run for about 20 episodes."

The television of the nineties is often accused of being bland, with few original and fresh ideas reaching our screens. Does Roger share this view of television today? "It is rather worrying really, especially the increase in gratuitous violence. We always go to the States for our holidays so we are very familiar with the scene over there. I think that the representation of violence and aggression is appalling, particularly as a magistrate, watching this deteriorating attitude to violence and this really worries me deeply."