

PERILS OF TIME TRAVEL

It's hard to ignore the siren song of time travel. I'd love to have the chance to venture backward so that I could ask my grandmother's beloved brother Tommy not to get his ten-year-old sister hooked on cigarettes. While I was at it, I might mention that he ought to go settle Western Canada like some of his siblings. Going west would be a much better idea than lying about his age so as to leave the coalmines of Nova Scotia for the trenches of World War I. At the very least, I could suggest that he watch out for the artillery shell with his name on it at Passchendaele and perhaps avoid breaking his little sister's heart.

Of course, then my father would not have been called "Alfred" (it's a long story) and, having not watched my grandmother's agonizing struggle with emphysema, the "I" who might exist would probably be the smoker. I've read my Ray Bradbury, I know I'd probably be squashing butterflies every time I turned around and that the negative results could be endless. Who among us does not have family heart aches to resolve, accidents to prevent, massacres to stop? Yet, when I contemplate time travel, I can't help but think about all the disastrous consequences of such journeys, not to mention the dire perils that await the hardy traveler.

But there are unhappy consequences to no-risk time travel as well. If the main character goes back in time, easily fixes everything, and we all live happily ever after, we don't have a very interesting story. This sort of theme might work in a light little tale, but the happy uses of time travel wouldn't support an entire science fiction subgenre. Danger is certainly key to *Doctor Who*, perhaps the most popular time travel series of all time. Ever since attending last summer's Worldcon, where she befriended the daughter of *sfsignal.com* founder John DeNardo, my ten-year-old has become an avid viewer of the

show. While I'm thankful to the Time Lord for saving humanity from time to time, I can't help but be amazed by the body count. Although it's a relief when *Doctor Who* takes a humorous turn, the threat of sudden death does keep the viewer's attention glued to the tube.

And time travel is hazardous even without Daleks to contend with. Any successful time traveler knows she'll have to take the Earth's orbit and rotation into account. Depending on how far back the trip is going, the experienced traveler knows he'd better bone up on plate tectonics. In a story I read as a teen—whose title and author have long since escaped into the mists of time—one unlucky adventurer ended up in the mouth of a dinosaur because he'd forgotten to take the development of rock strata into account. Kristine Kathryn Rusch's characters in "The Tower" get battered and bruised when they fail to calculate how much dirt and fill accumulates in just a few hundred years. Of course, if you overestimate this problem, the hapless traveler will find herself stuck somewhere underground.

If she wants to visit a specific historical event, the chronologist must use the correct calendar. As Kevin K. Birth, the author of *Objects of Time: How Things Shape Temporality*, points out in an excellent article on the subject (See www.tor.com/blogs/2012/09/alas-for-time-travel), pinpoint accuracy will require that the traveler takes both the leap second and the Earth's wobble into account as well.

The frustrations really begin to pile up once you get where you're going. Unless your grandfather was a heinous criminal, I've never understood why a time traveler would make such a momentous journey just to off his ancestor and eradicate himself. Still, visiting one's family can be treacherous in other ways. Lazarus Long may be able to survive a romance with his mom in Robert A. Heinlein's *Time*

Enough for Love, but like Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*, it seems more likely we'd find our own lives fading away if we disrupted our parents' relationship.

A jaunt to the future can land us in the midst of H.G. Well's hapless Eloi or the devastated landscape of John Varley's "Air Raid." Trips to the past can risk utter disillusionment if, as in T. L. Sherred's "E for Effort," the ultimate facts don't match our perception of history. Robert Silverberg's *Up the Line* speculates about one of the most exasperating aspects of time travel. Imagine a historian arriving at an event as influential as The Sermon on the Mount only to discover that a horde of time-travel tourists makes it impossible to have access to the speaker. And of course, there's always the possibility that a trip to the past might completely destroy the universe—as in Steven Utley's "Zip."

In fiction, there are many ways that time travelers can ruin our past and mess up our future. Yet, despite the possibility that my journey back in time might have destroyed the universe or put the wrong party in power, I'm not sure what effect I could have had a hundred years ago on a teenage boy in The Joggins, Nova Scotia. Why would Tommy Hill listen to a strange lady going on about the terrible consequences of tobacco addiction? I think it would be even harder to convince him to skip The Great War—even if I showed him a photograph of his name carved into Belgium's Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing. My certain knowledge of the future would probably have as much effect on this young Canadian as Cassandra's prophecies had on the Trojan War. Should it ever be invented, perhaps the greatest peril of time travel will be the discovery that the past remains a foreign country, where things are done differently, and the outcome cannot be affected, not even by our greatest desires. ○

—*Special thanks to Vincent G. Spadafora for filling me in on details about A. Hill, Canadian infantry, died 1917, and known to his family as "Tommy."*