World events and a radio broadcast cause panic in a small Washington town.

By Byron Cahill

Based on the radio play The War of the Worlds, by Howard Koch, which was based on the novel by H. G. Wells • Illustrations by John Joven

Prologue

Narrator 1: On October 30, 1938, Orson Welles, an up-and-coming actor and director, was readying his cast for a staged radio play.

Narrator 2: Welles’s show, “The Mercury Theatre on the Air,” was broadcast weekly on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) radio network. The show had decent ratings but was repeatedly beat by a more popular show, “The Chase and Sanborn Hour,” on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) network.

Narrator 3: Welles, of course, was aware of his show’s second-place standing. He wanted to do something big, something that had never been done before, to try to turn his ratings around. Plus, at 23 years old, Welles was a great showman. He was passionate about his craft and, some thought, even a delirious perfectionist.

Scene 1

Narr 2: It is the night before Halloween in Concrete, Wash. The Smith family has just finished dinner. The children, Marcy and Petey, ask to be excused from the table.

Narr 3: Marcy and Petey jump down from their seats and run into the living room.

Narr 1: Marcy and Petey jump down from their seats and run into the living room.

Mr. Smith: Yeah! Can we?

Petey: Yeah, can we?

Mrs. Smith: Honey, don’t. There’s no use getting all worked up. Think of the children … For now.

Mr. Smith: I am thinking of the children. I lived through one world war. I don’t want them to have to live through one as well.

Mrs. Smith: It’s awful. But there’s nothing we can do about it. It does no one good to worry about things half a world away.

Mr. Smith: Half a world away? Do you realize that Hitler is taking everything? First Austria, now Czechoslovakia. Listen to this. Winston Churchill says, “All is over. Silent, mournful, abandoned, broken, Czechoslovakia recedes into the darkness.” That’s Churchill! Does that sound promising to you?

Mrs. Smith: But dear, it’s so far away.

Mr. Smith: It doesn’t matter how far away it is. Adolf Hitler won’t be satisfied until he controls the whole world.

Narr 3: Mrs. Smith goes over to her husband and places her hand on his shoulder.

Mrs. Smith: Honey, don’t. There’s no use getting all worked up. Think of the children … For now.

Narr 1: He kisses her cheek to reassure her.

Mrs. Smith: I suppose we are safe. … For now.

Narr 2: In the other room, Marcy is laughing hysterically. She is 8 years old, and she understands the radio program much better than her brother, Petey, who is only 6.

Narr 3: Mr. Smith walks into the living room and grabs Marcy under her arms. He lifts her up.
and playfully swings her around.

**Mr. Smith:** And just what are you laughing about, missy?

**Marcy:** It’s Charlie, Daddy. He’s so funny!

**Narr 1:** McCarthy makes a final joke, and the audience on the radio applauds. A musical number begins, and Marcy and Petey lose interest. Mr. Smith puts his daughter down and changes the station on the radio from NBC to CBS.

**Narr 2:** On CBS, Mr. Smith hears another musical number. He sits down in his chair and puts up his feet as the children play around him.

**Petey:** Let’s play radio! I get to be Charlie!

**Marcy:** No, I get to be Charlie. I’m older!

**Mr. Smith:** (laughs) You do realize you are both arguing over who gets to be a dummy?

**Petey and Marcy:** Daadadadada!

**Narr 3:** Mr. Smith laughs again. He reaches up to the radio to change the dial back to NBC, when, all of a sudden, the music on CBS stops and an announcer comes on.

**Announcer:** Ladies and gentlemen, here is the latest bulletin from the Intercontinental Radio News. Toronto, Canada: Professor Morse of McGill University reports observing a total of three explosions on the planet Mars between the hours of 7:45 p.m. and 9:20 p.m. Eastern Standard Time.

**Mr. Smith:** What?

**Marcy:** It’s on the other side of the country, Petey. Very far away. Now shh!

**Narr 1:** Over the radio, there are sounds of police sirens and a lot of people. Carl Phillips reports.

**Carl Phillips:** Ladies and gentlemen, this is Carl Phillips, out at the Wilmuth farm in Grovers Mill, New Jersey. 22 miles from Trenton. The flash in the sky was visible within a radius of several hundred miles, and the noise of the impact was heard as far north as Elizabeth.

**Mr. Smith:** Honey, come in here.

**Narr 1:** Mrs. Smith enters the room. Marcy and Petey have stopped playing. They watch their parents intently.

**Announcer:** We have dispatched a special mobile unit to the scene and will have our commentator, Carl Phillips, give you a word description as soon as he can reach the farm. In the meantime, we take you to the Hotel Martinet in Brooklyn, where Bobby Millette and his orchestra are offering a program of dance music.

**Narr 2:** Music comes back on the radio.

**Mrs. Smith:** What’s all the fuss?

**Mr. Smith:** I’m not sure. Something about Mars.

**Mrs. Smith:** Mars?

**Petey:** Wow! Are aliens coming?

**Narr 3:** Marcy gives her brother a dirty look. The music is interrupted once again by the voice of the announcer.

**Announcer:** We take you now to Grovers Mill, New Jersey.

**Petey:** Daddy, where’s New Jersey?

**Marcy:** It’s like a big container.

**Mr. Smith:** It fell from the sky.

**Narr 2:** Mr. and Mrs. Smith give each other a concerned, knowing glance. If the radio broadcast gets any stranger, they will usher the children to bed.

**Phillips:** Well, I’ve never seen anything like it. The color is sort of yellowish white. Curious spectators now are pressing close to the object despite the efforts of the police to keep them back. They’re getting in front of my line of vision. Would you mind standing to one side, please?

**Police Officer:** One side, there, one side.

**Phillips:** Ladies and gentlemen, I wish I could convey the atmosphere … the background of this … fantastic scene. Hundreds of cars are parked in a field in back of us. Police are trying to rope off the roadway leading to the farm. But it’s no use. They’re breaking right through. Some of the more daring souls are now venturing near the edge.

** polic e Officer:** Keep back, there! Keep back, I tell you!

**Mrs. Smith:** Oh my!

**Phillips:** The top’s loose! Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed! Wait a minute! Someone’s crawling out of the hollow top. Someone or something. I can see peering out of that black hole two luminous disks … are they eyes? It might be a face. It might be …

**Narr 3:** Petey starts to cry. Mrs. Smith goes to Petey and picks him up.

**Phillips:** Good heavens, something’s wriggling out of the ground. What’s a sill-in-dur?

**Police Officer:** Keep back, there!

**Mrs. Smith:** Oh my!

**Phillips:** The top’s loose! Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed! Wait a minute! Someone’s crawling out of the hollow top. Someone or something. I can see peering out of that black hole two luminous disks … are they eyes? It might be a face. It might be …

**Narr 1:** As Mrs. Smith is walking her children up the stairs, she looks back at her husband, who is fixated on the radio. Neither of them can believe their ears.

**Phillips:** There, I can see the thing’s body. It’s large, large as a bear, and it glistsens like wet leather. But that face, it … ladies and gentlemen, it’s indescribable. I can hardly force myself to keep looking at it. The eyes are black and gleam like a serpent. The mouth is V-shaped with saliva dripping from its rimless lips that seem to quiver and pulsate. The monster or
whatever it is can hardly move. It seems weighed down by … possibly gravity or something. The thing’s rising up. It’s moving slowly. They’ve seen the thing’s rising up. The crowd can hardly move. I’ll pull this microphone with me as I talk. I’ll have to stop the description until I can take a new position. Hold on, will you please, I’ll be right back in a minute.

Narr 2: Mr. Smith is alone in his living room.

Mr. Smith: It can’t be. It just can’t be.

Phillips: Ladies and gentlemen … Am I on? … Ladies and gentlemen, here I am, in back of a stone wall that adjoins Mr. Wilmuth’s garden. From here I get a sweep of the whole scene. I’ll give you every detail as long as I can talk. As long as I can see. More state police have arrived. There’s no need to push the crowd back now. They’re willing to keep their distance. The captain and two police officers advance with something in their hands. I can see it now. It’s a white handkerchief tied to a pole … a flag of truce. If those creatures know what that means … what anything means! … Wait! Something’s happening!

Mr. Smith: What’s happening?!

Phillips: A humped shape is rising out of the pit. I can make out a small beam of light against a mirror. What’s that? There’s a jet of flame springing from the mirror, and it leaps right at the advancing men. It strikes them head-on! Good Lord, they’re turning into flame!

Narr 3: Mr. Smith forgets he is supposed to be calm for his children and screams.

Mr. Smith: (screaming) Oh my God! Honey! Honey! Honey!

Narr 1: Upstairs, both children are crying. Mrs. Smith tries to leave but they beg her to come back and she does. Mr. Smith remains glued to his radio.

Phillips: Now the whole field’s caught fire.

Narr 2: There is an explosion.

Phillips: The woods … the barns … the gas tanks of automobiles … it’s spreading everywhere. It’s coming this way. About 20 yards to my right …

Narr 3: The radio goes dead. Mr. Smith stares at the radio in disbelief.

Announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, due to circumstances beyond our control, we are unable to continue the broadcast from Grovers Mill. Evidently, there’s some difficulty with our field transmission. However, we will return to that point at the earliest opportunity.

Narr 1: Suddenly, there is a loud knock at the front door. Mr. Smith snaps out of his trance. For a brief moment, he wonders whether the aliens have come to Concrete as well.

Mr. Smith: (under his breath) Don’t be stupid. Aliens don’t knock.

Narr 2: Regardless, Mr. Smith approaches his front door slowly. Before he can reach it, it bursts open and his neighbor, John Barley, sweeps into the room.

Mr. Smith: Cripes, John! Come on in.

John Barley: Your windows are open?

Narr 3: John runs around the room, slamming windows shut and violently closing the blinds.

Narr 1: Mr. Smith is relatively calm in comparison to his neighbor.

Mr. Smith: I take it you’ve been listening to the radio?

Barley: Of course I have! It’s the end of the world! It’s coming!

Mr. Smith: It’s in New Jersey, John. And we don’t know anything yet. Not really.

Narr 2: Mrs. Smith calls her husband from the top of the stairs.

Mrs. Smith: Who’s down there, dear? What’s happening?

Mr. Smith: It’s all right. It’s just John. How are the kids?

Mrs. Smith: They’re terrified but calming down.

Narr 3: Without another word, she goes back to her children.

Narr 1: Mr. Smith has a disturbing thought.

Mr. Smith: John, where is your family?

Barley: They’re at Diane’s mother’s house. She doesn’t have a phone. Diane has the car. I don’t know what to do. I’m going to try to reach them. I have to make sure they’re safe.

Narr 2: Mr. Smith takes a firm hold of his neighbor’s shoulders.

Mr. Smith: They’re safe, John. You hear me? They’re safe. As far as we know, this is only happening in New Jersey. Diane and the kids are just 50 miles south of here. The best thing you can do right now is be calm.

Barley: Where’s your radio? We should be listening.

Narr 3: Barley pulls away from Mr. Smith and heads into the living room. He plants himself in a chair right next to the radio and turns up the volume.

Mr. Smith: John, please … my kids.

Barley: Oh. Sorry.

Narr 1: John turns down the radio, and somehow the soft volume makes the news even creepier.

Announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, here is a bulletin from Trenton. It is a brief statement informing us that the charred body of Carl Phillips has been identified in a Trenton hospital.

Barley: Dear Lord.

Announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, I have a grave announcement to make. Incredible as it may seem, both the observations of science and the evidence of our eyes lead to the inescapable assumption that those strange beings who landed in the Jersey farmlands tonight are the vanguard of an invading army from the planet Mars.

Narr 2: Mrs. Smith has entered the room. The children have fallen asleep, at last.
Narr 3: Both men jump, startled. Mr. Smith walks over to his wife and holds her. Together, they sit on the couch.

Announcer: The battle that took place tonight at Grovers Mill has ended in one of the most startling defeats ever suffered by any army in modern times. Seven thousand men armed with rifles and machine guns pitted against a single fighting machine of the invaders from Mars. One hundred twenty known survivors. The rest strewn over the battle area from Grovers Mill to Plainsboro, crushed and trampled to death under the metal feet of the monster or burned to cinders by its heat ray. The monster is now in control of the middle section of New Jersey and has effectively cut the state through its center.

Barley: They’re killing everyone! We have to do something!

Mr. Smith: What can we do, John? It’s half a world away.

Narr 2: From inside, his children are crying. Mr. Smith goes back in, closes the door, and comforts his family.

Mr. Smith: It’s all right. We’re fine. It’s all right.

Marcy: Are the Martians going to get us, Daddy?

Mr. Smith: There are no Martians, sweetheart.

Marcy: But the man on the radio said …

Narr 3: Her sentence is interrupted by Barley. He slams the door open and goes out on the porch. Mr. Smith follows.

Narr 3: Out on the porch, the two men stare at Barley’s house. The lights are out over there as well. They look to their neighbor’s house on the other side. No lights on.

Barley: They’re coming.

Narr 1: Barley bolts off the porch and runs to his house.

Mr. Smith: John!

Narr 2: He doesn’t answer. He throws the door open and goes out on the porch. Mr. Smith follows.

Narr 3: Are the Martians going to get us, Daddy?

Mr. Smith: There are no Martians, sweetheart.

Marcy: But the man on the radio said …

Narr 3: Her sentence is interrupted by Barley. He slams the door open and bursts in like a madman.

Narr 1: He is carrying two large shotguns and a pistol.

Barley: Here.

Narr 2: He hands a shotgun to Mr. Smith. He keeps the other one and tucks the pistol into his belt.

Mr. Smith: John …
Narr 3: Barley is about to refuse but then thinks better of it. He is very touched by the gesture but does not stay to acknowledge it. He goes back out the front door and gets in the Smiths’ car. Mrs. Smith: Honey! What are we going to do?

Narr 1: The sound of their car pulling away is like a death rattle in Mrs. Smith’s ears. Mr. Smith: We’ll go to the storm cellar. We can seal it up tight from the inside. Nothing can get in there.

Narr 2: When she returns, her children are smiling. Her husband has a flashlight and is making rabbit ears dance on the wall. Mr. Smith: Ready?

Mrs. Smith: Yes. Mr. Smith: OK, let’s go.

Narr 3: Together, with Mr. Smith leading them, the Smith family walks carefully out the back. They cross the backyard, looking in every direction at once. Narr 1: They get to the large doors in the ground, and Mr. Smith lifts them open. One by one, the family goes down. Mr. Smith is the last. He takes a look at the world outside, hoping it will not be his last, and then shuts the giant metal doors behind him.

Narr 2: The only thing to be heard in the night air is the sound of a great latch being fastened shut underground.

Epilogue

Orson Welles: This is Orson Welles, ladies and gentlemen, out of character to assure you that The War of the Worlds has no further significance than as the holiday offering it was intended to be—“The Mercury Theatre’s” own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying “Boo!” Starting now, we couldn’t soap all your windows and steal all your garden gates by tomorrow night … so we did the best next thing. We annihilated the world before your very ears and utterly destroyed the CBS. You will be relieved, I hope, to learn that we didn’t mean it, and that both institutions are still open for business. So good-bye, everybody, and remember the terrible lesson you learned tonight. That grinning, glowing, globular invader of your living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch, and if your doorbell rings and nobody’s there, that was no Martian … it’s Halloween.

The Truth Behind The Madness

On Halloween eve, 1938, Orson Welles brought real fear and horror into thousands of homes across the nation. It was an unsure time. The world was holding its breath, constantly concerned about Adolf Hitler’s advancing army. Anything seemed possible in this time of steady dread and worry. War was on everyone’s minds. When Welles presented his radio play, many listeners missed the beginning announcement that it was, indeed, a play. In towns across the country, people overreacted. Some took up arms and prepared to meet the alien invaders head-on. Others fled their homes and sought safety in the mountains. In Grovers Mill, N.J., the site where the first landing was “reported,” large crowds gathered in the streets, confused and terrified, searching the night sky and wondering from which direction the alien enemies would come.

In Concrete, Wash. (where READ’s play takes place), an uncanny coincidence occurred. During the radio broadcast of Welles’s The War of the Worlds play, a short circuit at the Superior Portland cement company caused a large-scale power failure. More than 1,000 people in the town of Concrete were affected. Many panicked, thinking it was a sign of a coming Martian attack. Welles could not have planned it better himself.

In the weeks and months that followed, despite much public outcry and angry letters to CBS, Welles’s radio program, “The Mercury Theatre on the Air,” obtained many new listeners as well as a new sponsor—Campbell’s Soup.

WRITE ABOUT IT

Imagine that you were in the town of Concrete when the power failure occurred. You had just been listening to a radio play that you thought was a real news broadcast. Imagine that your family sought safety from the coming aliens in your storm cellar. What then? Write a story about what happens next.

Send your story to us at word@weeklyreader.com. Put “Mars Attacks!” in the subject line. We’ll post the best stories on our blog, WORD, at www.readandwriting.com from October 12–16.

vocab

GLOBULAR: globe shaped
UNCANNY: seeming to have a supernatural basis, extraordinary

Narr 3: Barley: I’m going after my family. Mr. Smith: It’s 50 miles, John. Be reasonable.

Narr 3: Through the darkness, Barley stares hard in the direction of his neighbor. His eyes, now somewhat adjusted, focus on each other.

Barley: What would you have me do? What would you do?

Narr 1: Mr. Smith looks over at his family. He would go to the ends of the earth and beyond for them.

Mr. Smith: Take my car.

Mrs. Smith: What?

Narr 2: Mr. Smith goes to a hook by the door and removes his keys. He places them in his neighbor’s hand.

Mr. Smith: Go. Go to your family. John. God be with you.

12 READ October 2, 2009 October 2, 2009 READ 13

The Truth Behind The Madness

On Halloween eve, 1938, Orson Welles brought real fear and horror into thousands of homes across the nation. It was an unsure time. The world was holding its breath, constantly concerned about Adolf Hitler’s advancing army. Anything seemed possible in this time of steady dread and worry. War was on everyone’s minds. When Welles presented his radio play, many listeners missed the beginning announcement that it was, indeed, a play. In towns across the country, people overreacted. Some took up arms and prepared to meet the alien invaders head-on. Others fled their homes and sought safety in the mountains. In Grovers Mill, N.J., the site where the first landing was “reported,” large crowds gathered in the streets, confused and terrified, searching the night sky and wondering from which direction the alien enemies would come.

In Concrete, Wash. (where READ’s play takes place), an uncanny coincidence occurred. During the radio broadcast of Welles’s The War of the Worlds play, a short circuit at the Superior Portland cement company caused a large-scale power failure. More than 1,000 people in the town of Concrete were affected. Many panicked, thinking it was a sign of a coming Martian attack. Welles could not have planned it better himself.

In the weeks and months that followed, despite much public outcry and angry letters to CBS, Welles’s radio program, “The Mercury Theatre on the Air,” obtained many new listeners as well as a new sponsor—Campbell’s Soup.

WRITE ABOUT IT

Imagine that you were in the town of Concrete when the power failure occurred. You had just been listening to a radio play that you thought was a real news broadcast. Imagine that your family sought safety from the coming aliens in your storm cellar. What then? Write a story about what happens next.

Send your story to us at word@weeklyreader.com. Put “Mars Attacks!” in the subject line. We’ll post the best stories on our blog, WORD, at www.readandwriting.com from October 12–16.