

WAR OF THE WORLDS

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

By Bryon 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



CHARACTERS

(main characters in **boldface**)

Narrators 1, 2, 3

Marcy Smith, 8 years old

Petey Smith, 6 years old

Children of

Marcus and Lydia Smith

Lydia Smith

Marcus Smith

A married couple living in

Concrete, Wash.

Announcer, a radio newsman

Carl Phillips, an on-the-scene

reporter

Police Officer

John Barley, the Smiths'

neighbor

New York City Announcer, a radio

newsman in New York City

Radio Voice

Orson Welles, actor/director

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.

Narr 1: On the night of October

30, Welles was preparing to deliver a form of entertainment that would change the face of radio. The play was called *The War of the Worlds*. It was presented as news alerts, and many listeners tuned in late, thereby missing the introduction during which an announcer relayed that what the audience was about to hear was, in fact, a play. What happened next was terrifying to many Americans.

SCENE 1

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

Marcy: May we go listen to our show, Mommy?

Petey: Yeah, can we?

Narr 3: Mrs. Smith looks up at the clock on the wall.

Mrs. Smith: Well, it's not quite time yet, but you may.

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

Marcy and Petey: Yea!

Narr 2: Mrs. Smith chuckles quietly as she clears the table. Mr. Smith drinks his coffee and reads the newspaper. He mumbles to himself and seems concerned about something.

Mrs. Smith: Oh, what is it now, honey?

Mr. Smith: Germany is on a warpath. That is certain.

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 ...

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.

Narr 1: Mrs. Smith sighs and walks over to the sink to wash the dishes. In the **adjacent** room, she can hear the sounds of her children laughing. Their radio program, "The Chase and Sanborn Hour," has just begun. The star of the show is a wooden puppet named Charlie McCarthy.

Narr 2: Mr. Smith looks up at his

wife. Her back is turned to him. He can see fear and sadness in her shoulders.

Mr. Smith: Hey ...

Narr 3: He gets up from the table and goes to her. He puts his arms around her.

Mr. Smith: Hey, it's all right. You're right. It's awful what's happening over there. But it's not happening here. We're safe.

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

* vocab

ADJACENT: touching, adjoining

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: Daaad!

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?

Announcer: Now, nearer home, comes a special announcement from Trenton, New Jersey. It is reported that at 8:50 p.m. a huge, flaming object, believed to be a meteorite, fell on a farm in the neighborhood of 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 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. Well, I just got here. I haven't had a chance to look around yet. I guess that's it. Yes, I guess that's the ... thing, directly in front of me, half buried in a vast pit. Must have struck with terrific force. The ground is covered with splinters of a tree it must have struck on its way down. What I can see of the ... object itself doesn't look very much like a meteor, at least not the meteors I've seen. It looks more like a huge cylinder.

Petey: What's a sill-in-dur?

Mrs. Smith: It's like a big container.

Marcy: 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.

Marcy: What is it, Daddy?

Mr. Smith: I don't know, honey. Probably nothing.

Phillips: Just a minute! Something's happening! Ladies and gentlemen, this is terrific! This end of the thing is beginning to flake off! The top is beginning to rotate like a screw! The thing must be hollow!

Police 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

shadow like a gray snake.

Marcy: I want to know what it is!

Mrs. Smith: It's nothing. It's a practical joke. Come on, let's go, off to bed. March!

Phillips: Now it's another one, and another. They look like tentacles to me.

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 glistens 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

*** vocab**
INTENTLY: firmly fixed or directed

whatever it is can hardly move. It seems weighed down by ... possibly gravity or something. The thing's rising up. The crowd falls back now. They've seen plenty. This is the most extraordinary experience. I can't find words ... 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.

*** vocab**

VANGUARD: the troops moving at the front of an army

Mrs. Smith: Impossible!

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.

Announcer: Communication lines are down from Pennsylvania to the Atlantic Ocean. Railroad tracks are torn, and service from New York to Philadelphia is discontinued except the routing of some trains through Allentown and Phoenixville. Highways to the north, south, and west are clogged with frantic traffic. Police and the Army Reserve are unable to control the mad flight.

Mrs. Smith: The war is getting closer. What should we do?

Announcer: Ladies and gentle-



men, we now take you to New York City, where our affiliate has a disturbing report.

New York City Announcer: I'm speaking from the roof of the broadcasting building in New York City. The bells you hear are ringing to warn the people to evacuate the city as the Martians approach. It is estimated that in the past two hours, 3 million people have moved out along the roads to the north. Hutchison River Parkway is still open for motor traffic. Avoid bridges to Long Island. They are hopelessly jammed. All communication with Jersey shore closed 10 minutes ago. There are no more defenses. I repeat, there are no more defenses. Our Army is wiped out ... artillery, air force, everything has been wiped out. This may be the last broadcast. We'll stay here to the end ...

Mrs. Smith: Honey, is this really happening?

Narr 1: Mr. Smith does not answer his wife. He does not

know how.

NYC Announcer: The streets are all jammed. The noise in the crowds is like New Year's Eve in the city. Wait a minute ... the enemy is now in sight above the Palisades. Five ... five great machines. First one is crossing the river. I can see it from here, wading the Hudson like a man wading through a brook.

Barley: It's the end. The end of the world!

NYC Announcer: A bulletin was just handed to me. ... Martian cylinders are falling all over the country. One outside Buffalo, one in Chicago, St. Louis ...

Mrs. Smith: No!

NYC Announcer: Now the first machine reaches the shore. He stands watching, looking over the city. His steel, cowlish head is even with the skyscrapers. He waits for the others. They rise like a line of new towers on the city's west side. Now they're lifting their metal hands. This is the end now. Smoke comes out ... black smoke, drifting over

the city. People in the streets see it now. They're running toward the East River ... thousands of them, dropping in like rats.

Petey: Mommy?

Narr 2: Petey and Marcy stand at the foot of the stairs, holding hands and looking terrified.

Narr 3: Mrs. Smith jumps up and rushes over to them.

Mrs. Smith: What are you doing out of bed? Come on ... up you go.

Narr 1: She starts to move them up the stairs, but then she stops. The radio holds her attention.

NYC Announcer: Now the smoke's spreading faster. It's reached Times Square. People are trying to run away from it ... but it's no use. They're falling like flies. Now the smoke's crossing Sixth Avenue ... Fifth Avenue ... the smoke is about 100 yards away from this building. It's 50 feet ...

Narr 2: The announcer begins to cough and gasp. There is a noise that sounds like a body

falling to the ground. And then nothing.

Petey: What happened to the man?

Narr 3: Mr. and Mrs. Smith stare at each other. Barley stares at the radio.

Narr 1: There is static. Then the voice of a radio operator trying to reach New York.

Radio Voice: 2X2L calling CQ. 2X2L calling CQ. 2X2L calling CQ. New York. Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone ...

Narr 2: Without warning, all the lights in the house go out. The radio is completely silenced. Marcy screams.

Marcy: Ahhh!

Narr 3: Mrs. Smith holds her daughter close and rocks her back and forth. She tries to reassure her, but she does not believe her own words.

Mrs. Smith: Shh. It's OK. It's OK. It's OK.

Narr 1: Barley stands and makes his way to the door.

Mr. Smith: John, where are you going?

Narr 2: He doesn't answer. He throws 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: 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 open the door 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 ...



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. Their 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.

*** vocab**

GLOBULAR: globe shaped

UNCANNY: seeming to have a supernatural basis, extraordinary

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: He looks down at his children. They are not crying. They are not screaming. They are trying to be brave for their father.

Mr. Smith: You kids are doing great. And believe me, everything is going to be fine. OK?

Narr 3: Marcy and Petey nod their heads.

Mrs. Smith: Marcus ...

Mr. Smith: Please, Lydia. Go grab

some blankets and pillows. There's plenty of food and water down there. Enough to last us at least a month.

Narr 1: Mrs. Smith tries not to think about the time her husband has just presented her. She races up the stairs and grabs an armful of blankets and pillows.

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.



AP IMAGES

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.