

Aliens, Planets and Fantasy

FIFTY years ago, Orson Welles convinced many Americans that creatures from the planet Mars had invaded New Jersey.

"War of the Worlds", broadcast, as a radio play on October 30, 1938, revealed man's fear — and fascination — at the thought of alien contact. Listeners thought that the simulated news broadcast was really warning them that hordes of outer beings were on their way.

Modern audiences might not panic when Welles' voice booms across the airwaves again to commemorate the broadcast's 50th anniversary. Most people would assert that we are too sophisticated to fall for such fantasy.

Yet governments continued to pump money into space research to discover what is out there and science fiction fans abound. Alien beings, imagined or real, still invade the human psyche. Although 1988 audiences are unlikely to identify with the helpless victims of creatures from Mars, evidence suggests that they still believe something or someone — exists beyond the planet Earth.

Popular movies like Star Wars portray man fighting against, and socializing with, a host of wierd and wacky aliens. The various forms and talents of these creatures are limited only by the human imagination.

The technology that enables us to "go where no man has gone before" is inspired by the same urge that moved H.G. Wells to write "War of the Worlds" — the need to feel we are not alone.

Primitive man's earth was the only planet, around which revolved a mystical heaven full of strange beings and inexplicable forces. Not only were these beings aware of man's existence, they actually controlled his destiny. Rituals, beliefs and myths allowed man to engage in dialogue with these beings that would ensure the proper amount of rain, sun and other ingredients of a good life.

Ancient cultures also relied heavily on aliens as fodder for their myths.

BY DIANE BRADY

Gods, goddesses and an assortment of other beings would zoom down from the sky for good or ill. Once there, they would perform some feat or create something that mere mortals could barely understand and never hope to repeat. Like the primitive alien, these beings were actively engaged in human existence.

What man has never been fully able to explain has often been projected into the heavens. Beings there could possess strange powers not possible on earth. Until the age of Sciences in the sixteenth century, these creatures were limited to the religious realm.

Copernicus' theory that the earth revolved around the sun with numerous other planets relegated us to a humbler status in the universe. But it also opened up a range of possibilities for other life forms to exist. Indeed, the invention of the telescope backed up the theory by revealing more planets that were basking in the sun's light than previously imagined.

Strange creatures began to pop out of literature from planets far, far away. Indeed, they were flying to our planet well before we thought we would ever be able to fly around it ourselves. Science fiction carved out a healthy market in the nineteenth century with writers like H.G. Wells beginning to find fame.

Industrial and technological progress has increased our preoccupation with alien contact. With special effects and realistic make-up, we can create more authentic aliens in our movies. Space exploration and radar technology force us to actually begin our search, instead of just thinking about it.

Indeed, the only difference between frightened radio listeners in 1938 and today's audience is that, now, we are likely to be the invaders.

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