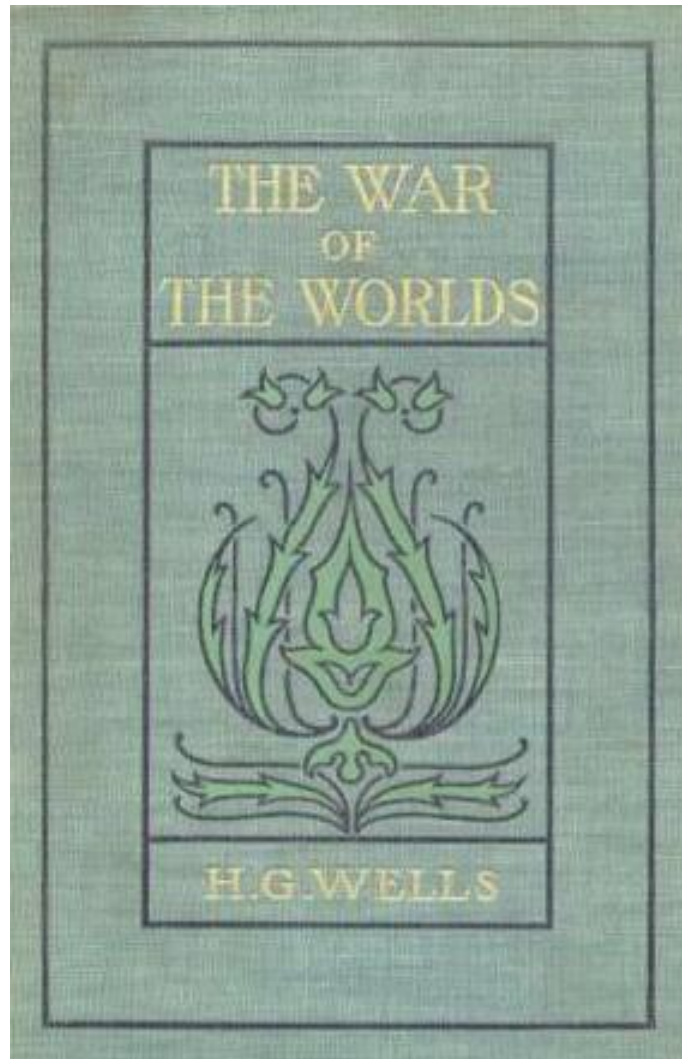


BOOK DISCUSSION KIT



The War of the Worlds

by H. G. Wells

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Summary

The War of the Worlds is the ultimate tale of Earth's invasion, written by one of the fathers of the science fiction genre. They came from a depleted, dying planet. Their target: the riches of a moist, green Earth. With horrifyingly advanced machines of destruction, they began their inexorable conquest. The subjugation of Earth seemed destined to be ... but was it?

Author Information

Hebert George (H.G.) Wells was born on September 21, 1866 in Kent, England. While inhibited by an injured leg for several months during his youth, he passed the time reading library books brought to him by his father, stoking what would become a lifelong passion for the written word.



As a young man Wells earned a scholarship to the Normal School of Science in South Kensington, and eventually earned a degree in biology from London University in 1890. While teaching he began writing in earnest, finding success with his early "scientific romances" *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Wells was often preoccupied with the future of mankind, which manifested in his "utopian" novels including *Anticipations* (1901), *Mankind in the Making* (1903), and *A Modern Utopia* (1905). He also worked to share educational material with the public at large through his nonfiction titles, particularly *Outline of History* (1920) and *The Science of Life* (1931).

Wells died of unspecified causes (some reports suggest liver cancer or complications related to diabetes) in 1946 at the age of 79. In addition to *The War of the Worlds*, he authored numerous short stories, over fifty novels and an even greater number of nonfiction books and articles on a variety of topics including history, science, and politics.

Selected titles by this author:

- *The Time Machine* (1895)
- *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)
- *The Invisible Man* (1897)
- *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910)
- *The First Men in the Moon* (1901)
- *Kipps: The Story of a Simple Soul* (1905)
- *Tono-Bungay* (1909)
- *The World Set Free* (1914)
- *The Outline of History* (1919)
- *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933)
- *A Modern Utopia* (1905)
- *Men Like Gods* (1923)
- *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916)
- *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934)
- *Star Begotten* (1937)
- *In the Days of the Comet* (1906)

About the Novel

Like many novels at the time, *The War of the Worlds* was published originally in serial format, appearing in Pearson's Magazine in 1897. Bound volumes divided into Book One and Book Two were published in 1898. The book has not gone out of print since, a tribute to its enduring popularity. The narrative is presented as a factual account told largely from the first-person perspective of the narrator.

The War of the Worlds was labeled as a "scientific romance" when it was published, a precursor of what is now generally referred to as science fiction. Such works mixed science and politics with speculative fiction. The events of *The War of the Worlds* are presented starkly, perhaps even brutally, allowing the science to enhance the reality of the fantastic scenario. Wells' experience as a science teacher is evident throughout, and further adds to the feeling of authenticity.

The timelessness of *The War of the Worlds* has made it a regular source of adaptation in the years since its publication. Perhaps the most infamous version of the novel came with Orson Welles' 1938 radio drama adaptation, delivered with such realism and urgency that it convinced some listeners that a Martian invasion was actually occurring. (A copy of this broadcast, as well as a later broadcast featuring comments on the event from both H.G. Wells and Orson Welles, has been included in this book kit.) The iconic 1953 film version from Paramount Pictures, which replaced the Martian tripods with flying machines, brought *The War of the Worlds* to the big screen. The novel's tripods returned in Steven Spielberg's 2005 big-budget version of the novel, this time steeped in post-9/11 fears and anxieties.

If you like this novel, you may also like...

Arthur C. Clarke

Edgar Rice Burroughs

Orson Scott Card

E.E. Smith

Octavia E. Butler

Historical Overview

The War of the Worlds was released during the late Victorian era, a time of industrialization and colonization for the British Empire as well as an era of considerable change worldwide. Developments in modern weaponry during the wars of the nineteenth century led to fears of invasion from outside forces despite the demonstrated might of the British military. This unease was exploited to great effect by Wells and his invading Martians, who used technology that mankind could not fully understand. In *The War of the Worlds* the British Empire, often seen as an invading power by the indigenous people of its colonies, must face a seemingly unstoppable imperialistic force from another world.

Natural selection and Darwinism were new and controversial ideas in the late nineteenth century. Influenced by mentor Thomas Henry Huxley, who was a supporter of Darwin, Wells embraced the concept that man is not a product of divine creation but instead an evolved member of the animal kingdom driven by the need to survive. The humans in *The War of the Worlds* largely act out of fear of death and the instinct for survival, while the more highly evolved Martians lay waste to the countryside.

The second law of thermodynamics, which states that the amount of energy in the universe that can be harnessed is always decreasing, was another major scientific topic of the day. To the popular imagination, such a concept suggested that the universe was counting down to an inevitable end. This sense of doom permeates *The War of the Worlds*, making the human extinction at the hands (or tentacles, in this case) of the Martians a nearly certain and almost natural course of events as an advanced species, having depleted the resources of their Martian home world, forcibly takes the resources of another planet.

Historical Events of 1898

Jan 1	New York City is divided into five boroughs.
Feb 12	Henry Lindfield of England becomes the first automobile fatality when his car hits a tree.
Feb 27	The <i>USS Maine</i> sinks in Cuba, contributing to the declaration of the Spanish-American War.
Jun 13	The Yukon Territory is established.
Jul 7	The Hawaiian Islands are annexed by the United States.
Aug 14	Invented by pharmacist Caleb Bradham, "Brad's drink" is renamed <i>Pepsi-Cola</i> .
Nov 29	C.S. Lewis is born in Belfast, Ireland.
Dec 26	The discovery of radium is announced by Marie and Pierre Curie.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the book differ from the 1953 movie adaptation or the Spielberg 2005 version of the story? How are minor characters, like the curate and the artilleryman, treated in the book as compared to in the films? Why might those changes have been made?
2. The narrator of *The War of the Worlds* is never given a name. Many of the other major characters are not given names either. What might Wells have been trying to suggest by doing this?
3. It has been suggested that the character of the curate represents organized religion in *The War of the Worlds*. What might Wells be saying about the role of organized religion in the social and political problems of the world, particularly in times of crisis? Do you agree or disagree?
4. What is the function of the artilleryman in the novel? What might he represent? Are the protagonist's actions toward him justified?
5. The Martians are defeated without any direct action from mankind. Man "wins" almost by default. What might this say about the control humans have over the world around them?
6. Does the ambiguity of the ending, mankind has won but it is uncertain for how long, impact your enjoyment of the book?
7. Much of the human behavior demonstrated in *The War of the Worlds* is not exactly mankind at its best. People in the story often act selfishly with hysterical fear. Is the book particularly negative in its view of mankind in general?
8. In addition to his passion for reading and writing, Wells had studied to be a biologist. What effect did this combination of interests have on his writing style?
9. H.G. Wells has been accused by some critics as advocating social engineering, an idea whereby society attempts to hasten the rise of the strong and the demise of the weak. In *The War of the Worlds*, do you think that Wells was agreeing or disagreeing with this idea?
10. Recent years have seen resurgence in the popularity of disaster and apocalyptic stories, but now zombies, as found in *The Walking Dead* and *World War Z*, have taken over much of the territory originally held by invading aliens. What is behind the timeless appeal of such stories? Why do audiences continue to respond so strongly to these themes?