

Diversions



Alien hunters

Richard Chaves as Lt. Colonel Paul Ironhorse, Lynda Mason Green as Suzanne McCullough, and Jared Martin as Dr. Harrison Blackwood chase alien invaders in *War of the Worlds*, new this fall on WXIN 59 (cable channel 17).

Martians, Martians everywhere

H.G. Wells must be spinning in his grave.

It seems doubtful that the 19th century author would have imagined that his alien invasion epic, *War of the Worlds*, would become his most influential legacy in 20th Century fiction — or that the novel would be raided and twisted by copycats not once, but twice.

Wells' novel was one of the first works of serious literature to speculate about contact between humans and intelligent beings from another planet. But the writer took the idea two steps past that starting point, first, by making his aliens malevolent, and secondly, by making them smarter than us.

In the book, the technologically superior Martians handily whip Industrial Age Earth into submission. They win the war. The only reason the human race gets its own world back is biological: the Martians, being from another planet, have no natural immunity to terrestrial bacteria. The bugs bite the Martians, and the Martians bite the dust.

Hollywood kept the main story flow reasonably intact (as intact as it ever does) when it grabbed the story in the heyday of the flying saucer era about 1950. The Martians arrive in spacefaring cylinders that crash like meteors, just like in the novel. And they proceed to beat the stuffing out of the human race. The main differences were in updating the invaders' technology. Instead of three-legged walking machines armed with heat rays, they use hovering machines shielded with force fields, that are invulnerable even to a point-blank atomic blast. But once again, the wily bacteria snuff the Martians even as their conquest seems complete.

The *War of the Worlds* movie, which hits the reruns every whipsnitch, is something of a classic. It can be regarded as just another flying saucer flick, like *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* or *Invasion from Mars*, but since it was based on honest-to-God

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literature, even diluted, it remains a tad more literate and scientific than most of that genre.

Movies from *It* to *Alien* to TV shows such as *The Invaders* and *V* all owe a portion of their origins to the prodigious imagination of H.G. Wells and to the movie which bore his novel's name.

But the name is just about the

story, it's a stew. Take bits and pieces from *Aliens*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Night of the Living Dead*, and any number of UFO books, and stick the title of an H.G. Wells novel on top, and you have it.

The scenario is this: after 35 years, the aliens, who have been in some sort of hibernation all this time, are accidentally awakened by terrorists who raid a military base where their bodies are stored in metal drums. Thereafter, the aliens take over the terrorists' bodies and try to get hold of their three saucer-like war machines, which are being kept in a hangar along with other top secret UFO material, on a different base.

Never mind the fact that the Martians never offered to take over anyone's body in the book or the movie. Never mind the fact that in those versions, the aliens were physically frail and relied on their powerful machines for their might. In this version, they're as mean and strong as a tank full of tigers, and they'll move into your body before you can blink.

Oh, and on TV, they're not Martians any longer. They're *aliens*. Another striking lack of fidelity and imagination. After all, if the government covered up an alien invasion 35 years ago, as the show seems to hint, couldn't it also cover up the fact that there was life on Mars, for the sake of the series?

This could have been a good show, if it had been done with a little more imagination and a little less derivation. As it is, the show goes for the easy imitation and the cheap gross-out, instead.

A word to the wise: this show isn't for kids — or adults — with squeamish stomachs. The aliens have a tendency to melt, quite graphically, when they die, and every now and then they burst out from inside somebody's belly, à la *Alien*.

If you're looking for some cheap thrills, this show may be all right for you. But if you're looking for something new, look somewhere else.

TV review

If you're looking for cheap thrills and gross-outs, this show may be for you

only similarity that exists between the novel, the movie, and the new TV show, *War of the Worlds*.

My impression is that some hot-shot screenwriter or producer looked at the box-office success of *Aliens*, and perhaps the rating strength of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and then happened to catch a glimpse of the *War of the Worlds* movie on the Late Show some Saturday night.

Hmmmmmm. It's science fiction. It's got aliens in it. Let's do a remake!

Mind you, as an action-adventure show, the premiere episode wasn't really all that bad. It has suspense, and shooting, and running, with some scary stuff and a few gross-outs thrown in.

That's the point. This isn't a