

# Mars, Martians, Metaphors, and Mirrors

## Why does the red planet fascinate storytellers?

Interview by Scott Hauser

From a brief appearance in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in 1726 to this fall's big screen blockbuster, *The Martian*, Earth's nearest neighbor in the solar system has a storied history in popular culture and the literary life of science fiction. Even as advances in interplanetary science bring Mars into ever sharper focus, the planet has remained a compelling source for creative artists to explore ideas about what it means to be human, says Jeffrey Tucker, associate professor of English.

"Science fiction is always a way of commenting on what's happening in the here and now," says Tucker, who studies and teaches literature, particularly in the context of technology, science, culture, and identity. A leading scholar of author Samuel R. Delany, whose science fiction and critical analysis have made him an influential figure in the genre, Tucker says he often reminds his students that seemingly speculative or imaginative stories are usually grounded in a larger context. "When I teach science fiction, I quote Delany, who says, 'Science fiction is not about the future; it uses the future as a narrative convention to present significant distortions of the present. . . . Science fiction is about the current world—the given world shared by writer and reader.'"

### Why does Mars seem to loom so large in popular culture?

One of the best answers I've read is from Isaac Asimov's introduction to an edition of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. He basically suggests that much of our fascination with Mars and the notion of life on Mars has to do with a matter of translation—or a mistranslation—of the Italian word "canali." In 1877, when



**MARS ATTACKS!** With Martians who invade Earth from militaristic spacecraft (like those illustrated in a 1906 edition), H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* set the stage for later stories about Mars.

the Italian astronomer Schiaparelli noted markings on Mars's surface, dark lines that seemed to crisscross each other, he called them channels. The Italian word for channels is "canali," and this somehow became "canals" in English rather than channels. There's a big difference between the two. A channel can be a naturally occurring geographic phenomenon, whereas a canal suggests an artificial creation, which further suggests some intelligence created it. That prompted a lot of people, including the American astronomer Percival Lowell, to speculate

about intelligent life on Mars. There are, of course, the other facts about Mars: it's the closest planet to Earth and it's similar to Earth in terms of its physical makeup. And it has moons. The similarities have invited reflection and comparison.

### Have the stories evolved over time?

There are a couple main trajectories to the stories. In *The War of the Worlds*, Earth is invaded by Martians. The Martians are intelligent, but they certainly are not humanoid. They're more like octopi, and

they arrive in these gigantic military spaceships. In the opposite trajectory, human beings go to Mars. One of the earliest and best known is Edgar Rice Burroughs's Barsoom series. The first book is *A Princess of Mars*, which was published in 1917. Burroughs is best known for *Tarzan of the Apes*, and the Mars books are very similar except that instead of Africa, the protagonist, John Carter, goes to Mars.

### What do those stories tell us about humans?

Science fiction is always a way of commenting on what's happening in the here and now. In *The War of the Worlds*, the only country we see invaded is England. Why is that? Wells is commenting on British imperialism—on the English and their history of invading and colonizing other parts of the world. And it's violent and troubling and disturbing. What's also interesting is that the Martians are defeated not by humanity, but by bacteria, the lowliest life form on the planet.

The classic science fiction story about humans going to Mars would be Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, published in 1950. In those stories, there's an implicit criticism of human beings who dismiss or who are disrespectful of an ancient Martian culture that existed there. What's also interesting is the shift in perspective. In the *Martian Chronicles*, you can see Earth from Mars. And Earth is this greenish star-like thing. But the inhabitants of Mars can also see the destruction of Earth, because there's war happening on Earth. And that green star is on fire in the night sky.

Mars provides a perspective, both literally and figuratively, on the planet Earth.

### Do you think the average reader who enjoys science

### fiction thinks about the stories on that level?

I can't speak to what the average reader gets from the stories, but I challenge my students to be very thoughtful about what we read and why. What I find most interesting about science fiction is its allegorical ability to comment on what's happening

at the time described by the text—on a social, or political, or ideological level.

I'm also interested in other themes, including alien encounters, which are about the ways in which people who are different encounter one another. There are lots of ways in which humanity's encounters

with aliens from other planets are metaphors or allegories for humanity's encounters with itself. That encounter can be friendly and productive, or it can be violent and exploitative.

### It's intriguing that as scientists announce more details about Mars, the imaginative

### pull remains strong.

What do they say? Never let the facts get in the way of a good story. I don't think what we have learned about Mars and what it's really like has gotten in the way of our ability to tell good stories, or had an effect on the kind of stories that have been told about Martians.

## Tensions on the Frontier

Historian Thomas Devaney examines the rise of religious intolerance in medieval Spain.

The Christian civic and religious leaders of 15th-century Castile didn't have televised news conferences or government websites to help them shape or respond to public opinion.

Instead, they staged public spectacles that served much the same purpose—including festivals, religious processions, and knightly tournaments that often included a theatrical narrative framework.

In his new book, *Enemies in the Plaza: Urban Spectacle and the End of Spanish Frontier Culture, 1460-1492* (University of Pennsylvania Press), Thomas Devaney, assistant professor of history, shows how such staged events eventually helped harden Christian attitudes toward Muslims in neighboring Granada and toward the religious minorities in Castile, eventually leading to religious conflict and repression.

Modern Spanish anxieties and ambivalences about Islam may descend from those of Spaniards' "medieval forebears," Devaney says. His book traces the arc of those reactions in the late 15th century.

For Americans today, the term "frontier" implies action, says Devaney—a place "to be crossed, conquered, pushed back, and made civilized." But for medieval Castilians it denoted a "borderland region," an area for interactions between cultures. Christians living closest to the frontier between Castile and Granada had developed—despite their religious differences—lucrative trading partnerships with Muslims on

the other side, partnerships that were disrupted with great loss to both sides whenever conflicts flared. So they tended to be the least enthused about going to war with Muslims.

With the spectacles, rulers were trying to provide the people with what they guessed the populace wanted, says Devaney. The people, in turn, took the spectacles as evi-

individual or group's control."

Often, spectacles staged by figures of authority had extensive subtexts that reflected a complicated balancing of competing interests. For instance, Don Miguel Lucas de Iranzo, the ruler of the frontier town of Jaén, was eager to resume military campaigns against Muslims across the border. But to do so, he had

Devaney says that in the 32 years the book covers, people in the region moved from a kind of acceptance of difference to fear to, finally, dismissal, as the majority asserted that theirs was a Christian society. He calls the time frame of his book a period of "growing intolerance and a renewed push for holy war."

The questions his book address-



**SPECTACLE:** Staged events—similar to this “Game of Sticks” played in Valladolid in honor of Philip the Fair—helped harden Christian attitudes toward Muslims in medieval Spain, argues historian Thomas Devaney. It’s a story of “how one society moved from greater to lesser tolerance,” he says.

dence that they had license to lash out against religious minorities.

“The city council members and nobles thus see more and more public activity against religious minorities; the level of the rhetoric gets ratcheted up a notch; and we have this ongoing back and forth,” he says.

“In other words, there’s really no bad guy, no person planning this. To a large degree it just happens, and it’s not under any

to “inspire a local population that was just as happy to trade with the Muslims as fight them,” Devaney writes.

Nothing would be the same, however, after spectacles later in the time period turned violent. In the 1470s in Córdoba, for instance, a religious procession ended in a riot. As the violence spiraled out of control, many of the town’s converts were killed, while others fled for their lives.

es, he writes, “have emerged anew in the last couple of decades, fueled by increased immigration and by fears of terrorism.”

“In a small sense, this is a book about particular group interactions in a few cities on the Spanish-Granadan border in the late 15th century,” he says. “In a larger sense, it is a story about how one society moved from greater to lesser tolerance.”

—Bob Marcotte