

Science Fiction

Eight Episodes

By Robert Reed



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With minimal fanfare and next to no audience, *Invasion of a Small World* debuted in the summer of 2016, and after a brief and disappointing run, the series was deservedly shelved.

One glaring problem was its production values: Computer animation had reached a plateau where reality was an easy illusion, spectacle was the industry norm, and difficult tricks like flowing water and human faces were beginning to approximate what was real. Yet the show's standards were barely adequate, even from an upstart Web network operating with limited capital and too many hours of programming to fill. The landscapes and interior shots would have been considered state-of-the-art at the turn of the century, but not in its premiere year. The characters were inflicted with inexpressive faces and stiff-limbed motions, while their voices were equally unconvincing, employing amateur actors or some cut-rate audio-synthesis software. With few exceptions, the dialogue was sloppy, cluttered with pauses and clumsy phrasing, key statements often cut off in mid-sentence. Most critics decided that the series' creators were striving for a real-life mood. But that was purely an interpretation. Press kits were never made available, and no interviews were granted with anyone directly involved in the production, leaving industry watchers entirely to their own devices—another problem that served to cripple *Invasion*.

Other factors contributed to the tiny audience. One issue that couldn't be discussed openly was the racial makeup of the cast. Success in the lucrative North American market

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meant using characters of obvious European extraction. Yet the series' leading man was an Indian astronomer working at a fictional college set in, of all places, South Africa. With an unpronounceable name and thick accent, Dr. Smith—as his few fans dubbed him—was a pudgy, prickly creation with a weakness for loud shirts and deep belches. His wife was a homely apparition who understood nothing about his world-shaking work, while his children, in direct contrast to virtually every other youngster inhabiting popular entertainment, were dim-witted creatures offering nothing that was particularly clever or charming.

A paucity of drama was another obvious weakness. The premiere episode involved a routine day in Dr. Smith's life. Eighteen hours of unexceptional behavior was compressed to fifty-three minutes of unexceptional behavior. Judging by appearances, the parent network inserted commercial breaks at random points. The series' pivotal event was barely noticed by the early viewers: One of Dr. Smith's graduate students was working with Permian-age rock samples, searching for key isotopes deposited by ancient supernovae. The student asked her professor about a difficult piece of lab equipment. As always, the dialogue was dense and graceless, explaining almost nothing to the uninitiated. Genuine scientists—some of the series' most unapologetic fans—liked to point out that the instruments and principles were genuine, though the nomenclature was shamelessly contrived. Fourteen seconds of broadcast time introduced a young graduate student named Mary—a mixed-race woman who by no measure could be considered attractive. She was shown asking Dr. Smith for

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help with the problematic instrument, and he responded with a wave of a pudgy hand and a muttered, "Later." Following ads for tiny cars and a powerful asthma medicine, the astronomer ordered his student to come to his office and lock the door behind her. What happened next was only implied. But afterwards Dr. Smith was seen sitting with his back to his desk and his belt unfastened, and the quick-eyed viewer saw Mary's tiny breasts vanish under a bra and baggy shirt. Some people have interpreted her expression as pain, emotional or otherwise. Others have argued that her face was so poorly rendered that it was impossible to fix any emotion to her, then or later. And where good writers would have used dialogue to spell out the importance of the moment, bad writers decided to ignore the entire interpersonal plotline. With a casual voice, Mary mentioned to her advisor/lover that she had found something strange in the Permian stone.

"Strange," he repeated.

With her thumb and finger, she defined a tiny space.

"Metal. A ball."

"Ball?"

"In the rock."

Smith scratched his fat belly for a moment, saying nothing. (Judging by log tallies, nearly 10 percent of the program's small audience turned away at that point.) Then he quietly said to her, "I do not understand."

"What it is..."

"What?"

She said, "I don't know either."

"In what rock?"

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"Mine. The mudstone—"

"You mean it's artificial...?"

"Looks so," she answered.

He said, "Huh."

She finished buttoning her shirt, the back of her left hand wiping at the corner of her mouth.

"Where?" Smith asked.

She gave the parent rock's identification code.

"No, the metal ball," he interrupted. "Where is it now?"

"My desk drawer. In a white envelope."

"And how big?"

"Two grains of rice, about."

Then, one last time, the main character said, "Huh." And, finally, without any interest showing in his face, he fastened his belt.

* * * *

The next three episodes covered not days, but several months. Again, none of the scientific work was explained, and nothing resembling a normal plotline emerged from the routine and the tedious. The increasingly tiny audience watched Dr. Smith and two of his graduate students working with an object almost too small to be resolved on the screen—another significant problem with the series. Wouldn't a human-sized artifact have made a greater impact? The ball's metal shell proved to be an unlikely alloy of nickel and aluminum. Cosmic radiation and tiny impacts had left the telltale marks one would expect after a long drifting journey through space. Using tiny lasers, the researchers carefully cut

through the metal shell, revealing a diamond interior. Then the diamond heart absorbed a portion of the laser's energy, and once charged, it powered up its own tiny light show. Fortunately a nanoscopic camera had been inserted into the hole, and the three scientists were able to record what they witnessed—a rush of complex images coupled with an increasingly sophisticated array of symbols.

"What is this?" they kept asking one another.

"Maybe it's language," Mary guessed. Correctly, as it happened. "Someone's teaching us ... trying to ... a new language."

Dr. Smith gave her a shamelessly public hug.

Then the other graduate student—a Brazilian fellow named Carlos—pointed out that, whatever the device was, Mary had found it in rock that was at least a quarter of a billion years old. "And that doesn't count the time this little machine spent in space, which could be millions more years."

After the show's cancellation, at least one former executive admitted to having been fooled. "We were promised a big, loud invasion," he told an interviewer from *Rolling Stone*. "I talked to the series' producer. He said an invasion would begin right after episode four. Yeah, we knew the build-up was going to be slow. But then aliens from the dinosaur days were going to spring to life and start burning cities."

"Except," said the interviewer.

"What?"

"That's not quite true. The Permian happened before there were any dinosaurs."

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With a shrug, the ex-executive brushed aside that mild criticism. "Anyway, the important thing is that bad-ass aliens were supposed to come out of the rock. They were going to grow huge and start kicking us around. At least that's what the production company—EXL Limited—assured us. A spectacle. And since we didn't have to pay much for those episodes, we ended up purchasing the first eight shows after seeing only a few minutes of material...."

Invasion was cancelled after the fifth episode.

The final broadcast episode was an artless synopsis of the next twenty months of scientific work. Dr. Smith and his students were just a tiny portion of a global effort. Experts on six continents were making a series of tiny, critical breakthroughs. Most of the story involved faceless researchers exchanging dry e-mails about the tiny starship's text and images. Translations were made; every shred of evidence began to support the obvious but incredible conclusions. The culminating event was a five-minute news conference. Dripping sweat, shaking from nerves, the astronomer explained to reporters that he had found a functioning starship on Earth. After a glancing thanks to unnamed colleagues, he explained how, in the remote past, perhaps long before there was multicellular life on Earth, an alien species had manufactured trillions of tiny ships like this one. The ships were cast off into space, drifting slowly to planetary systems scattered throughout the galaxy. The vessel that he had personally recovered was already ancient when it dropped onto a river bottom near the edge of Gondwanaland. Time had only slightly degraded its onboard

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texts—a history of the aliens and an explanation into the nature of life in the universe. By all evidence, he warned, human beings were late players to an old drama. And like every other intelligent species in the universe, they would always be small in numbers and limited in reach.

The final scene of that fifth episode was set at Dr. Smith's home. His oldest son was sitting before a large plasma screen, destroying alien spaceships with extraordinarily loud weapons. In what proved to be the only conversation between those two characters, Smith sat beside his boy, asking, "Did you see me?"

"What?"

"The news conference—"

"Yeah, I watched."

"So?" he said. And when no response was offered, he asked, "What did you think?"

"About what?"

"The lesson—"

"What? People don't matter?" The boy froze the battle scene and put down his controls. "I think that's stupid."

His father said nothing.

"The universe isn't empty and poor." The boy was perhaps fourteen, and his anger was the most vivid emotion in the entire series. "Worlds are everywhere, and a lot of them have to have life."

"Millions are blessed, yes," Dr. Smith replied. "But hundreds of billions more are too hot, too cold. They are metal-starved, or married to dangerous suns."

His son stared at the frozen screen, saying nothing.

"The alien texts only confirm our most recent evidence, you know. The earth is a latecomer. Stellar births are slowing, in the Milky Way, and everywhere, and the production of terrestrial worlds peaked two or three billion years before our home was created."

"These texts of yours ... they say that intelligent life stays at home?"

"Most of the time, yes."

"Aliens don't send out real starships?"

"It is far too expensive," Smith offered.

The boy pushed out his lower lip. "Humans are different," he maintained.

"No."

"We're going to build a working stardrive. Soon, I bet. And then we'll visit our neighboring stars and colonize those worlds—"

"We can't."

"Because they tell us we can't?"

"Because it is impossible." His father shook his head, saying with authority, "The texts are explicit. Moving large masses requires prohibitive energies. And terraforming is a difficult, often impossible trick. And that is why almost every world that we have found to date looks as sterile as the day they were born."

But the teenage boy would accept none of that. "You know, don't you? That these aliens are just lying to us? They're afraid of human beings, because they know we're the toughest, meanest things in the universe. And we're going to take them on."

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For a long moment, Dr. Smith held silent.

Then the boy continued his game, and into the mayhem of blasters, the father mouthed a single dismissive word: "Children."

* * * *

Eighteen months later, the fledging Web network declared bankruptcy, and a small consortium acquired its assets, including *Invasion of a Small World*. Eager to recoup their investment, the new owners offered all eight episodes as a quick-and-dirty DVD package. When sales proved somewhat better than predicted, a new version was cobbled together, helped along by a genuine ad budget. The strongest initial sales came from the tiny pool of determined fans—young and well educated, with little preference for nationality or gender. But the scientists in several fields, astronomy and paleontology included, were the ones who created a genuine buzz that eventually put *Invasion* into the public eye.

The famous sixth episode helped trigger the interest: That weak, rambling tale of Dr. Smith, his family and students, was temporarily suspended. Instead, the full fifty-three minutes were dedicated to watching a barren world spinning silently in deep space. According to corporate memos, the last three episodes arrived via the Web, bundled in a single package. But it was this episode that effectively killed the series. There were no explanations. Nothing showed but the gray world spinning, twenty minutes before the point-of-view gradually pulled away. The world was just a tiny speck of metal lost in the vastness of space. For astronomers, it was a

fascinating moment—a vivid illustration that the universe could be an exceedingly boring place. Stars were distant points of light, and there was only silence, and even when millions of years were compressed into a nap-length moment, nothing was produced that could be confused with great theatre.

But what the astronomers liked best—what got the buzz going—were the final few minutes of the episode. Chance brought the tiny starship into the solar system, and chance guided it past a younger Saturn. The giant moon, Titan, swung close before the ship was kicked out to Neptune's orbit. Then it drifted sunward again, Mars near enough to reveal its face. Two hundred and fifty million years ago, Titan was bathed in a much denser atmosphere, while Mars was a temporarily wet world, heated by a substantial impact event. Experts in those two worlds were impressed. Only in the last year or two, probes had discovered what *Invasion* predicted on its own, including pinpointing the impact site near the Martian South Pole.

In much the same way, episode seven made the paleontologists crazy.

With its long voyage finished, the tiny starship struck the Earth's upper atmosphere, quickly losing its momentum as well as a portion of its hull. The great southern continent was rendered accurately enough to make any geologist smile, while the little glimpses of Permian ecosystems were even more impressive. Whoever produced the series (and there was a growing controversy on that matter), they had known much about protomammals and the early reptiles, cycads and

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tree ferns. One ancient creature—lizard in form, though not directly related to any modern species—was the only important misstep. Yet five months later, a team working in South Africa uncovered a set of bones that perfectly matched what a vanished dramatic series had predicted ... and what was already a cultish buzz grew into a wild, increasingly public cacophony....

At least forty thousand sites—chat rooms and blogs and such—were dedicated to supporting the same inevitable conclusion.

By means unknown, aliens had sent a message to earthlings, and it took the form of *Invasion of a Small World*.

* * * *

The eighth episode was a genuine treasure.

Dr. Smith reappeared. Several years older, divorced and with his belly fat stripped off by liposuction, he was shown wandering happily through a new life of endless celebrity. His days and long evenings were spent with at least three mistresses as well as a parade of world leaders. Accustomed to the praise of others, he was shown grinning confidently while offering his interpretations of the ancient message. The universe was almost certainly sprinkled with life, he explained. But despite that prolificacy, the cosmos remained an enormous, very cold, and exceptionally poor place. The gulfs between living worlds were completely unbridgeable. No combination of raw energy and questing genius could build a worthy stardrive. Moreover, even direct communication between local species was rarely worth its considerable cost,

since civilizations rarely if ever offered each other anything with genuine worth.

"Technology has distinct limits," he warned the starlets and world leaders that he met at cocktail parties. "Humans are already moving into the late stages of scientific endeavor. What matters most, to us and to any wise species, is the careful shepherding of energy and time. That is why we must care for our world and the neighboring planets inside our own little solar system. We must treasure every day while wasting nothing, if only to extend our histories as far as into the future as possible."

"That strikes me as such depressing news," said one prime minister—a statuesque woman blessed with a starlet's beautiful face. "If there really are millions and billions of living worlds, as you claim, and if all the great minds on all of those worlds are thinking hard about this single problem, shouldn't somebody learn how to cheat the speed of light or create free energy through some clever trick?"

"If that were so," Dr. Smith replied, "then every world out there would be alive, and the giant starships would arrive at our doorstep every few minutes. But instead, human experience has discovered precisely one starfaring vessel, and it was a grain of metallic dust, and to reach us it had to be exceptionally lucky, and, even then, it had to wait a quarter of a billion years to be noticed."

The prime minister sipped her virgin Mary and chewed on her lower lip. Then with a serious tone, she said, "But to me ... there seems to be another reasonable explanation waiting for our attention..."

"Which would be what, madam?"

"Subterfuge," she offered. "The aliens are intentionally misleading us about the nature of the universe."

Bristling, he asked, "And why would they do such a thing?"

"To cripple our future," she replied. "By convincing us to remain home, they never have to face us between the stars."

"Perhaps you're right to think that, madam," said the old astronomer, nodding without resolve. Then in his final moment in the series' final episode, he said, "A lie is as good as a pill, if it helps you sleep...."

* * * *

For years, every search to uncover the creative force behind *Invasion of a Small World* came up empty. And in the public mind, that single mystery remained the final, most compelling part of the story.

Former executives with the doomed network had never directly met with the show's producers. But they could recount phone conversations and teleconferences and e-mails exchanged with three apparent producers. Of course, by then, it was possible to invent a digital human face and voice while weaving a realistic mix of human gestures. Which led some to believe that slippery forces were plainly at work here—forces that no human eye had ever witnessed.

Tracking down the original production company produced only a dummy corporation leading to dusty mailboxes and several defunct Web addresses. Every name proved fictional, both among the company's officers and those in the brief credits rolling at the end of each episode. Surviving tax forms

lacked any shred of useful information. But where the IRS might have chased down a successful cheat, the plain truth was that whoever was responsible for *Invasion* had signed away all future rights in exchange for a puddle of cash.

The few skeptics wondered if something considerably more ordinary was at play here. Rumors occasionally surfaced about young geniuses working in the Third World—usually in the Indian tech-cities. Employing pirated software and stolen equipment, they had produced what would eventually become the fifth most successful media event in history. But in the short term, their genius had led nowhere but to obscurity and financial ruin. Three different candidates were identified— young men with creative minds and most of the necessary skills. Did one of them build *Invasion* alone? Or was it a group effort? And was the project's failure the reason why each of them committed suicide shortly after the series' cancellation?

But if they were the creators, why didn't any trail lead to them? Perhaps because the consortium that held all rights to *Invasion* had obscured the existing evidence. And why? Obviously to help feed this infectious and delicious mood of suspicion. To maintain an atmosphere where no doubts could find a toehold, where aliens were conversing with humans, and where the money continued to flow to the consortium like a great green river.

* * * *

The most durable explanation was provided by one of the series' most devoted fans—a Nobel laureate in physics who was happy to beat the drum for the unthinkable. "*Invasion* is

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true everywhere but in the specifics," he argued. "I think there really was an automated starship. But it was bigger than a couple of grains of rice. As big as a fist, or a human head. But still small and unmanned. The ship entered our solar system during the Permian. With the bulk of it in orbit, pieces must have landed on our world. Scouts with the size and legs of small cockroaches, maybe. Maybe. And if you take the time to think it through, you see that it would be a pretty silly strategy, letting yourself become a tiny fossil in some enormous bed of mudstone. What are the odds that you'd survive for 250 million years, much else ever get noticed there?

"No, if you are an automated starship, what would be smart is for that orbiting mothership to take a seat where nothing happens and she can see everything. On the moon, I'd guess. She still has the antennas that she used to hear the scouts' reports. She sleeps and waits for radio signals from the earth, and when they arrive, she studies what she hears. She makes herself into a student of language and technology. And when the time is ripe—when she has a product to sell—she expels the last of her fuel, leaving the moon to land someplace useful. Which is pretty much anywhere, these days.

"Looking like a roach, maybe, she connects to the Web and offers her services at a cut-rate price.

"And that is how she delivers her message.

"Paraphrasing my fictional colleague, 'A lie is as good as a truth, if it leads you to enlightenment.'"

* * * *

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The final scene in the last episode only seemed anticlimactic. The one-time graduate student, Mary, had been left behind by world events. From the beginning, her critical part in the research had been downplayed. But the series' creator, whoever or whatever it was, saw no useful drama in that treachery. The woman was middle-aged and happy in her obscurity, plain as always and pregnant for at least the second time.

A ten-year-old daughter was sitting beside Mary, sharing a threadbare couch.

The girl asked her mother what she believed. Was the universe really so empty and cold? And was this the way it would always be?

Quietly, her mother said, "I think that's basically true, yes."

The girl looked saddened.

But then Mary patted her daughter on the back of a hand, smiling with confidence. "But dear, I also believe this," she said. "Life is an invasion wherever it shows itself. It is relentless and it is tireless, and it conquers every little place where living is possible. And before the universe ends, all the good homes will know the sounds of wet breathing and the singing of glorious songs."

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