

# DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

## QUARANTINE EDITION

MARCH 18, 2020:  
[THE ZOO HOAX](#)

The question of truth in news media is nothing new: in fact, as 19<sup>th</sup> century America grew into mass culture around newspapers, the question of who you could trust was a biggie. Just one example: the 1874 Zoo Hoax.

### THE STORY

On November 8, 1874, staff at the *New York Herald* signed off on a tremendous story to break in the next day's first edition: an animal jailbreak at the Central Park Zoo. If the story was to be believed, a sunny tourist attraction had gone suddenly, grotesquely bad, resulting in a bloody rampage across Manhattan: panthers, polar bears, tigers and a particularly tetchy rhinoceros set loose upon an unsuspecting public.

Police and national guard were described beside themselves while big cats brawled, wild with fear and aggression. The leopard, "after killing a little child and mutilating several women," made his way into a bird enclosure and made lunch of everything. The paper urged: "All citizens, except members of the National Guard, are enjoined to keep within their houses or residences until the wild animals now at large are captured or killed." The sound of cannon fire would announce the all-clear. Only folks who bothered to read to the end of the lengthy article discovered that "Of course the entire story given above is a pure fabrication. Not one word of it is true."

The whole story had been the brainchild of *Herald* staff, who while taking a day's walk through Central Park noticed how weak the animals' cages appeared, and since they knew that [editor James Gordon Bennett, Jr.](#) loved the publicity of a good scandal, they figured a large-scale public hoodwink was the way to ask: is New York's disaster planning up to snuff?

This was just one of many 19<sup>th</sup> century public hoaxes, fueled by mass media, innovation and the rise of science fiction.

Read on at [the blog](#) for more fun facts and resources.

### DISCUSS:

How do you decide what news sources you trust, and why?

How do real news and creative fiction inspire each other, in any era?

How might you have reacted to reading the Zoo Hoax story? Would you have read to the end?

Check out some great discussion questions from [tolerance.org](#) on media and credibility.

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

**Questions? Comments? Say hello.**

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### READ MORE:

Primary source: "[Awful Calamity](#)," New York Herald, November 9, 1874

"[The Central Park Zoo Escape](#)," [hoaxes.org](#)

"[The Newspaper Hoax That Panicked a City](#)," Washington Post

"[The Great Moon Hoax was Simply a Sign of its Time](#)," Smithsonian

[Inquiry on the Internet](#),  
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