

## RAY BRADBURY: FAHRENHEIT 451 MISINTERPRETED

BY AMY E. BOYLE JOHNSTON WEDNESDAY, MAY 30, 2007 | 9 YEARS AGO

WHEN THE PULITZER PRIZES were handed out in May during a luncheon at Columbia University, two special citations were given. One went to John Coltrane (who died in 1967), the fourth time a jazz musician has been honored. The other went to Ray Bradbury, the first time a writer of science fiction and fantasy has been honored.

Bradbury, a longtime Los Angeles resident who leads an active civic life and even drops the Los Angeles Times letters to the editor on his views of what ails his town, did not attend, telling the Pulitzer board his doctor did not want him to travel.

But the real reason, he told the L.A. Weekly, had less to do with the infirmities of age (he turns 87 in August) than with the fact that recipients only shake hands with Lee C. Bollinger, Columbia University's president, and smile for a photograph.

He wanted to give a speech, but no remarks are allowed. "Not even a paragraph," he says with disdain.

In his pastel-yellow house in upscale Cheviot Hills, where he has lived for more than 50 years, Bradbury greeted me in his sitting room. He wore his now-standard outfit of a blue dress shirt with a white collar and a jack-o'-lantern tie (Halloween is his favorite day) and white socks. This ensemble is in keeping with Bradbury's arrested development. George Clayton Johnson, who gave us Logan's Run, says, "Ray has always been 14 going on 15."

Bradbury still has a lot to say, especially about how people do not understand his most literary work, Fahrenheit 451, published in 1953. It is widely taught in junior high and high schools and is for many students the first time they learn the names Aristotle, Dickens and Tolstoy.

Now, Bradbury has decided to make news about the writing of his iconographic work and what he really meant. Fahrenheit 451 is not, he says firmly, a story about government censorship. Nor was it a response to Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose investigations had already instilled fear and stifled the creativity of thousands.

This, despite the fact that reviews, critiques and essays over the decades say that is precisely what it is all about. Even Bradbury's authorized biographer, Sam Weller, in The Bradbury Chronicles, refers to Fahrenheit 451 as a book about censorship.

Bradbury, a man living in the creative and industrial center of reality TV and one-hour dramas, says it is, in fact, a story about how television destroys interest in reading literature.

"Television gives you the dates of Napoleon, but not who he was," Bradbury says, summarizing TV's content with a single word that he spits out as an epithet: "factoids." He says this while sitting in a room dominated by a gigantic flat-panel television broadcasting the Fox News Channel, muted, factoids crawling across the bottom of the screen.

His fear in 1953 that television would kill books has, he says, been partially confirmed by television's effect on substance in the news. The front page of that day's L.A. Times reported on the weekend box-office receipts for the third in the Spider-Man series of movies, seeming to prove his point.

"Useless," Bradbury says. "They stuff you with so much useless information, you feel full." He bristles when others tell him what his stories mean, and once walked out of a class at UCLA where students insisted his book was about government censorship. He's now bucking the widespread conventional wisdom with a video clip on his Web site ([http://www.raybradbury.com/at\\_home\\_clips.html](http://www.raybradbury.com/at_home_clips.html)), titled "Bradbury on censorship/television."

As early as 1951, Bradbury presaged his fears about TV, in a letter about the dangers of radio, written to fantasy and science-fiction writer Richard Matheson. Bradbury wrote that "Radio has contributed to our 'growing lack of attention.' .??. This sort of hopscotching existence makes it almost impossible for people, myself included, to sit down and get into a novel again. We have become a short story reading people, or, worse than that, a QUICK reading people."

HE SAYS THE CULPRIT in Fahrenheit 451 is not the state — it is the people. Unlike Orwell's 1984, in which the government uses television screens to indoctrinate citizens, Bradbury envisioned television as an opiate. In the book, Bradbury refers to televisions as "walls" and its actors as "family," a truth evident to anyone who has heard a recap of network shows in which a fan refers to the characters by first name, as if they were relatives or friends.

The book's story centers on Guy Montag, a California fireman who begins to question why he burns books for a living. Montag eventually rejects his authoritarian culture to join a community of individuals who memorize entire books so they will endure until society once again is willing to read.

Bradbury imagined a democratic society whose diverse population turns against books: Whites reject Uncle Tom's Cabin and blacks disapprove of Little Black Sambo. He imagined not just political correctness, but a society so diverse that all groups were "minorities." He wrote that at first they condensed the books, stripping out more and more offending passages until ultimately all that remained were footnotes, which hardly anyone read. Only after people stopped reading did the state employ firemen to burn books.

Most Americans did not have televisions when Bradbury wrote Fahrenheit 451, and those who did watched 7-inch screens in black and white. Interestingly, his book imagined a future of giant color sets — flat panels that hung on walls like moving paintings. And television was used to broadcast meaningless drivel to divert attention, and thought, away from an impending war.

Bradbury's latest revelations might not sit well in L.A.'s television industry, where Scott Kaufer, a longtime television writer and producer, argues, "Television is good for books and has gotten more people to read them simply by promoting them," via shows like This Week and Nightline.

Kaufer says he hopes Bradbury “will be good enough in hindsight to see that instead of killing off literature, [TV] has given it an entire boost.” He points to the success of fantasy author Stephen King in television and film, noting that when Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451*, another unfounded fear was also taking hold — that television would destroy the film industry.

And in fact, Bradbury became famous because his stories were translated for television, beginning in 1951 for the show *Out There*. Eventually he had his own program, *The Ray Bradbury Theater*, on HBO.

BRADBURY SPENDS MOST OF his time now in a small space on the second floor of his home that contains books and mementos. There is his Emmy from *The Halloween Tree*, an Oscar that belonged to a friend who died, a sculpture of a dinosaur and various Halloween decorations. Bradbury, before a stroke left him in a wheelchair, typed in the basement, which is filled with stuffed animals, toys, fireman hats and bottles of dandelion wine. He referred to these props as “metaphors,” totems he drew on to spark his imagination and drive away the demons of the blank page.

Beginning in Arizona when his parents bought him a toy typewriter, Bradbury has written a short story a week since the 1930s. Now he dictates his tales over the phone, each weekday between 9 a.m. and noon, to his daughter Alexandria.

Bradbury has always been a fan, and advocate, of popular culture despite his criticisms of it. Yet he harbors a distrust of “intellectuals.” Without defining the term, he says another reason why he rarely leaves L.A. to travel to New York is “their intellectuals.”

Dana Gioia, a poet who is chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and who wrote a letter in support of granting Bradbury a Pulitzer honor, compared him to J.D. Salinger, Jack London and Edgar Allan Poe. Another supporter wrote that Bradbury’s works “have become the sort of classics that kids read for fun and adults reread for their wisdom and artistry.”

In June, Gauntlet Press will release *Match to Flame*, a collection of 20 short stories by Bradbury that led up to *Fahrenheit 451*. Pointing to his unpublished proofreading version of the upcoming collection, Bradbury says that rereading his stories made him cry. “It’s hard to believe I wrote such stories when I was younger,” he says.

His book still stands as a classic. But one of L.A.’s best-known residents wants it understood that when he wrote it he was far more concerned with the dulling effects of TV on people than he was on the silencing effect of a heavy-handed government. While television has in fact superseded reading for some, at least we can be grateful that firemen still put out fires instead of start them.

Contact: Amy E. Boyle Johnston Follow: L.A. Weekly L.A. Weekly

# Torching the Library: Different Year, Same Temperature

 *The New York Times*, March 19, 2006

ONE balmy Hollywood night in 1947, Ray Bradbury and a friend took an after-dinner stroll along Wilshire Boulevard. A police officer pulled over and asked what they were doing. Even then, it seems, nobody walked in Los Angeles.

Mr. Bradbury, then a young writer scraping out a living turning out stories for magazines with names like "Thrilling Wonder Stories" and "Weird Tales," turned his absurd encounter with the Los Angeles Police Department into a terse short story, "The Pedestrian," set in a future in which aimless ambling is a crime. His protagonist, though, took a moment to notice something else on his night walks: rows of "tomblike houses ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead, the gray or multicolored lights touching their faces, but never really touching them."

It took just a few more steps, plus a dark leap of the imagination, for Mr. Bradbury to turn this image of a simple pleasure outlawed by a stupefied culture into the disturbing world of his 1953 novel, "Fahrenheit 451." Named for the temperature at which paper ignites, the novel depicts a near-future society in which firemen don't extinguish fires but instead burn books, and where the complacent populace, numbed by nonstop television and advertising, seems all too eager to embrace enforced ignorance. Suicide, abortion and teenage violence run rampant. Politics are a joke. And somewhere in the white-noise background, there's a war on.

Like the 20th century's other iconic dystopian novels -- "Brave New World," "Nineteen Eighty-Four," "A Clockwork Orange"-- "Fahrenheit 451" today reads more as straight-up social commentary than as science fiction. At least that's how Joe Tantalo, the artistic director of the Godlight Theater Company, read Mr. Bradbury's book when he was looking for a follow-up to a successful production of "A Clockwork Orange" last winter. Mr. Tantalo's production of "Fahrenheit 451," using a 1979 stage adaptation of the novel by Mr. Bradbury, opens next week at 59E59, in the play's New York premiere. Mr. Tantalo, who says he worries about the survival of democracy in America, said he found the book's contemporary parallels so frightening that he set his bare-bones staging in the present.

"It's not a futuristic world -- there are no weird hats," Mr. Tantalo said of his production, which will use plexiglass screens and some modest stage wizardry but no video and no props. "There are too many parallels to where we are now that it doesn't make any sense to set it in another time."

When Mr. Bradbury recently gave Godlight his blessing for the New York production, he told Mr. Tantalo that the play "is more relevant now than ever."

"The need to be stimulated has increased on radio, in TV, in motion pictures and in magazines," Mr. Bradbury, 85, said in a telephone interview from his home in Los Angeles.



Indeed, the book's prescient litany of symptoms may explain why it has never been out of print. It serves as both a blunt, handy teaching tool -- class, see what happens if you don't respect the written word? -- and a seemingly ever-fresh vision of a society entertaining itself to death. Francois Truffaut made a film version in 1966, and the writer and director Frank Darabont ("The Shawshank Redemption," "The Green Mile") has a new film script that has yet to find studio backing.

"I've read it, it's wonderful, but the main problem is getting funding," Mr. Bradbury said of the new adaptation. "It's going to be very expensive."

Given that the book was published at the height of the Red Scare, the anti-intellectual fear-mongering of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy might seem a likely inspiration for the fascistic firemen of "Fahrenheit." Not so, Mr. Bradbury said.

"I wasn't thinking about McCarthy so much as I was thinking of the library of Alexandria 5,000 years before," he said. "It burnt three or four times -- a couple of times on purpose and once by accident." In fact, "Fahrenheit 451" was composed in a library at the University of California, Los Angeles, on a rented typewriter in the basement. When he wanted a break, the young author, a lifelong bibliophile, would wander dreamily through the stacks. "My mind turned to something that would endanger all that," he said. "I thought about what had happened in Italy and Germany so recently, and the rumors about what was going on in Russia."

In "Fahrenheit 451," a totalitarian government enforces its regime of stupor with a fiery reign of terror, and over the constant drone of the television one hears the periodic screech of warplanes.

But Mr. Bradbury does not share the view of some -- including Michael Moore, whom Mr. Bradbury still hasn't forgiven for "stealing" his title for the film "Fahrenheit 9/11" -- that the Bush administration is waging an Orwellian "endless war" to cover a hidden agenda. Mr. Bradbury's interpretation of current events instead follows another familiar line of attack: that the fury of the Arab world is blowback from the longstanding American policy of favoring Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. His solution to the Middle East impasse sounds like science fiction: create a new Jewish homeland in south Florida. "People think I'm joking when I say that," Mr. Bradbury said.

"I don't believe that any of the governments of the past 60 years, including the current one, are guilty of using war to aggrandize their power," Mr. Bradbury said flatly, pointing to Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson as two presidents he saw destroyed by unpopular wars.

Mr. Bradbury still writes daily ("I'm finishing work on three new novels," he said) and makes frequent public appearances at libraries and colleges. The topic of education, much more than Washington politics, is what really gets him wound up. "We've allowed our education to go to hell," he said, warming to a pet subject. "We have too many technologies impacting us, thousands of factoids inhabiting our eardrums every day, so that we get a feeling that maybe we're educated, but we're not."

It's not only the electronic media that are shortchanging us, he said: "If you go to the newsstand today, you see 1,000 magazines, and there's hardly an idea in them. They've been invaded by advertising. I had a poem in Good Housekeeping a few years ago. I looked through and I couldn't find it. I finally

called them and asked, 'Where's my damn poem?' It was on Page 150, opposite the Clorox ad."

Fahrenheit 451

GODLIGHT THEATER COMPANY

59E59, Theater C, 59 East 59th Street, Manhattan, Tuesday through April 23, (212) 279-4200.

CAPTION(S):

Photo: Bee Duffell in Francois Truffaut's 1966 film version of "Fahrenheit 451," the Ray Bradbury novel being brought to the stage next week in a New York premiere by the Godlight Theater Company at 59E59. (Photo by Everett Collection)

By ROB KENDT

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# Ray(mond) (Douglas) Bradbury

 *Contemporary Novelists*, 2001

Updated: July 24, 2008

**Born:** August 22, 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois, United States

**Died:** June 05, 2012 in Los Angeles, California, United States

**Other Names:** Bradbury, Ray Douglas; Banat, D.R.; Douglas, Leonard; Elliott, William (American writer, 1920-); Spaulding, Douglas; Spaulding, Leonard; Bradbury, Raymond Douglas; Sterling, Brett (American writer, 1920-); Bradbury, Raymond

**Nationality:** American

**Occupation:** Writer

**Nationality:** American. **Born:** Waukegan, Illinois, 22 August 1920. **Education:** Los Angeles High School, graduated 1938. **Family:** Married Marguerite Susan McClure in 1947; four daughters. **Career:** Since 1943 full-time writer. President, Science-Fantasy Writers of America, 1951-53. Member of the Board of Directors, Screen Writers Guild of America, 1957-61. Lives in Los Angeles. **Awards:** O. Henry prize, 1947, 1948; Benjamin Franklin award, 1954; American Academy award, 1954; Boys' Clubs of America Junior Book award, 1956; Golden Eagle award, for screenplay, 1957; Ann Radcliffe award, 1965, 1971; Writers Guild award, 1974; Aviation and Space Writers award, for television documentary, 1979; Gandalf award, 1980. D.Litt.: Whittier College, California, 1979. **Agent:** Harold Matson Company, 276 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10001. **Address:** c/o Bantam, 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10103, U.S.A.

## Ray Bradbury comments:

I am not so much a science-fiction writer as I am a magician, an illusionist. From my beginnings as a boy conjurer I grew up frightening myself so as to frighten others so as to cure the midnight in our souls. I have grown into a writer of the History of Ideas, I guess you might say. Any idea, no matter how large or small, that is busy growing itself alive, starting from nowhere and at last dominating a town, a culture, or a world, is of interest. Man the problem solver is the writer of my tales. Science fiction becoming science fact. The machineries of our world putting away and keeping our facts for us so they can be used and learned from. Machines as humanist teachers. Ideas of men built into those machines in order to help us survive and survive well. That's my broad and fascinating field, in which I will wander for a lifetime, writing past science fictions one day, future ones another. And all of it a wonder and a lark and a great love. I can't imagine writing any other way.

Although he has written six novels, including the classics *Fahrenheit 451* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Ray Bradbury is best known as an author of short stories. His style is so economical, striking, and lyrical that it has been described as prose poetry, and he is as skillful at presenting horror and the grotesque as was Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), his primary influence. Bradbury is known as one of "the big four" of the genres of science fiction and fantasy, the others being Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert Heinlein. He is deeply respected and beloved by genre fans and by students who study him in high school and college. His significance in fantasy and horror owe much to his background, his prose style, his recurrent themes, and the sense of wonder that pervades his work.

Bradbury's second story sale, "The Candle," marked the beginning of his association with *Weird Tales*,

the legendary American pulp magazine that first appeared in 1923 and that, despite changes in editorial staff and many deaths and resurrections, keeps returning from the literary grave. This magazine published such enormously popular authors as H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Bloch of *Psycho* fame, and *Conan the Barbarian's* creator Robert E. Howard. *Weird Tales* led supernatural fiction out of a poorly written Gothic and ghost tradition. It is essential to grasp the primacy of *Weird Tales* and its large fan base to recognize Bradbury's contemporary literary milieu and the adulation he earned during the years 1941 to 1948, when he became the most distinguished contributor to that magazine.

Bradbury began publishing collections of linked stories in the 1950s with *The Martian Chronicles* and *The Illustrated Man*. *Fahrenheit 451* and *Dandelion Wine* are fix-ups, or novels constructed of previously published short stories. *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *Death Is a Lonely Business*, and *A Graveyard for Lunatics* are stand-alone novels.

*The Martian Chronicles* and *The Illustrated Man* exemplify Bradbury's evolving style, motifs, and themes. Though his technique varies from the subtle to the ironic to the hair-raising, one can call *The Martian Chronicles* a fantasy based on science fiction motifs and *The Illustrated Man*, which is darker and more tainted by the supernatural, despite occasional nods to science fiction (futuristic machines, spaceships, aliens), overall a work of horror.

*The Martian Chronicles* tells of the emigration of humans to a Mars that is either peopled by or haunted by eerie, wistful, telepathic Martians. Humans gradually displace and replace the natives, and in 2003 (which, in the 1940s, seemed sufficiently distant to allow for terraforming technologies), the settlement of Tenth City has hardly any red dust blowing through it, so exactly is it like a small midwestern town. In 2005 Earth is destroyed by thermonuclear war (as recounted in the classic short story "There Will Come Soft Rains") and, not long after, human colonies and customs have erased all vestiges of the natives. The men now are the Martians.

This sounds like an allegory of the European colonization of the West, and read in one sitting the stories may be taken as a dirge for lost civilizations. The theme of loss runs like a sad tune throughout Bradbury's work: loss of loved ones, of friendships, of youth, of golden opportunities, of marvels trampled in a blind rush of capitalistic greed. The dictum that "you can't stand in the way of progress" is multivalent in Bradbury's fiction. Progress brings us to the stars, but dazzles us so that many other good things are left behind.

The stories in *The Illustrated Man* are united by a slight yet disturbing conceit: the narrator encounters a man whose skin is painted by "living" tattoos. One of these will show the death of the observer if watched long enough. After a night of viewing different tattoo stories as though films in miniature, the narrator is horrified to see his own destiny revealed--in the future, from some unimaginable need for revenge, the illustrated man will strangle him to death.

Both books testify to Bradbury's deceptively simple, sentimental, lyrical prose and to challenging themes such as revenge, insanity, loneliness, hope, and survival. Bradbury's short, straightforward sentences owe their delights and horrors to sensory descriptions (such as the aromas of cut grass or burning autumn leaves), to settings evocative of his fondly remembered hometown Waukegan, Illinois, and to pensive dialogues in which young children or old men express their sense of wonder when contemplating the star-filled night sky, the miracles of sunlight or the menace of shadows, the

innocence of childhood, or the tragedies of missed meetings and lost loves.

*Dandelion Wine* is narrated by twelve-year-old Douglas (Bradbury's middle name) Spaulding, who is, like many of his young protagonists, loosely based on Bradbury himself. This work captures, as though in a glass of home-made wine, the recurring flavors and themes of his fiction. During the summer of 1928, Douglas gains maturity as the loss of a friend and the appearance of a murderer transform his perceptions of his world. The boy's powers of imagination, Bradbury emphasizes, both enrich and darken his life.

*Something Wicked This Way Comes* is again semi-autobiographical, but far darker--literally--than *Dandelion Wine*. Sunlight and sunset color *Dandelion Wine*, but much of *Something Wicked* occurs at night and in the dark places of the human psyche. Light and Dark are allegorized throughout the tale of Will Halloway and Jim Nightshade, who are seduced by the arrival in Green Town, Illinois, of a carnival called Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show. This evil carnival tempts the townsfolk with its supernatural powers to grant dreams--but also to steal souls. The merry-go-round, the Hall of Mirrors, the parade, and other carnivalesque trappings become truly creepy under Bradbury's skillful pen.

*Fahrenheit 451* treats the themes of imagination and loss so powerfully that it is alluded to in discussions of governmental oppression and censorship almost as commonly as George Orwell's *1984*. The protagonist, Guy Montag, has happily labored as a "fireman"--a burner of books--for ten years. As the novel opens, he meets seventeen-year-old Clarisse, who asks him unsettling questions: Does he ever think about his society instead of mouthing the socially acceptable phrases? Is he curious about the books he burns? Is he happy?

Their friendship changes his life. Montag begins to question his world, and finds fear and unhappiness everywhere. Eventually he meets a secret society of readers who preserve illegal books by memorizing them. A *New York Times* reviewer praised "Bradbury's account of this insane world, which bears many alarming resemblances to our own."

Bradbury's fiction developed into a more realistic (though still rhapsodic) mode during the 1960s and 1970s, and relied more on non-supernatural, if sometimes morbid, themes, such as dysfunctional marriages, the dangers of technology, fear of aging, and fear of death. This development can be observed in the collections *The Machineries of Joy* and *I Sing the Body Electric*. Bradbury contributed to his favorite genres by editing anthologies and writing children's stories; he also wrote nonfiction and plays.

Not until 1985 did a new Bradbury novel appear: *Death Is a Lonely Business*, which is based on his years as a pulp fiction writer. The protagonist's optimism and hope of success bizarrely preserve him from the deaths that are striking down many of his contemporaries. Like *Death*, *A Graveyard for Lunatics* is a detective novel about a writer, this one working in the Hollywood of the 1950s. Hired as a science fiction film writer at a big studio, he is led to the adjoining graveyard, where he discovers a body frozen in time. Though not as famous as his earlier work, both novels continue his theme of a past that cannot stop haunting the present.

Perhaps the greatest contribution Bradbury has made to fantasy and horror lies in his creating and ever re-creating a bona fide American romantic, melancholic tradition: a nostalgia for corn fields and

small towns and suburbs, replacing the previously overwhelming European nostalgia for aristocracies and castles and cathedrals.

Bradbury began writing for television in 1951 for such programs as *Alfred Hitchcock* and *The Twilight Zone*, and the highly praised USA Network television series *The Bradbury Theatre* (1985-92) is based on many of his short stories. Bradbury has also written plays and filmscripts, including the Gregory Peck-starring *Moby Dick* and the Academy Award-nominated *Icarus Montgolfier Wright*. *Fahrenheit 451* was adapted for film (by François Truffaut) in 1966, *The Illustrated Man* in 1969, and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* in 1983; and *The Martian Chronicles* appeared as a television miniseries. *Something Wicked* is the best of these adaptations.

In 1991 the extent of Bradbury's influence on later generations of writers was evidenced when William F. Nolan and Martin H. Greenberg commissioned twenty-two original stories (one by Bradbury) for *The Bradbury Chronicles*, published to honor his fiftieth year as a writer. The contributors included such noted names as Richard Matheson and his son Richard Christian Matheson, Charles L. Grant, F. Paul Wilson, Ed Gorman, and Chad Oliver. Horror authors Steven King and Clive Barker have also acknowledged his influence. Bradbury has earned the 1977 World Fantasy Award, the 1980 Grandmaster of Fantasy Gandalf Award, the 1989 Bram Stoker Award, and the 1988 Nebula Grand Master Award, and was inducted into the University of Kansas Center for the Study of Science Fiction's Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame (1999), all for Lifetime Achievement.

## Publications

### Novels

- *Fahrenheit 451*. New York, Ballantine, 1953 ; London, Hart Davis, 1954 ; with a new foreword by the author, Thorndike, Maine, G. K. Hall, 1997 .
- *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1962 ; London, Hart Davis, 1963 .
- *Death Is a Lonely Business*. New York, Knopf, 1985 ; London, Grafton, 1986 .
- *A Graveyard for Lunatics: Another Tale of Two Cities*. New York, Knopf, and London, Grafton, 1990 .
- *The Smile*. Mankato, Minnesota, Creative Education, 1991 .
- *Green Shadows, White Whale*. New York, Knopf, and London, HarperCollins, 1992 .
- *Quicker Than the Eye*. New York, Avon Books, 1996 .
- *Driving Blind*. New York, Avon Books, 1997 .
- *With Cat for Comforter*, illustrated by Louise Reinoehl Max. Salt Lake City, Utah, Gibbs Smith, 1997 .
- *Dogs Think That Every Day Is Christmas*, illustrated by Louise Reinoehl Max. Salt Lake City, Utah, Gibbs Smith, 1997 .
- *Ahmed and the Oblivion Machines: A Fable*, illustrated by Chris Lane. New York, Avon Books, 1998 .

### Short Stories



- *Dark Carnival*. Sauk City, Wisconsin, Arkham House, 1947 ; abridged edition, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1948 ; abridged edition, as *The Small Assassin*, London, New English Library, 1962 .
- *The Martian Chronicles*. New York, Doubleday, 1950 ; as *The Silver Locusts*, London, Hart Davis, 1951 .
- *The Illustrated Man*. New York, Doubleday, 1951 ; London, Hart Davis, 1952 ; New York, Avon Books, 1997 .
- *The Golden Apples of the Sun*. New York, Doubleday, and London, Hart Davis, 1953 .
- *The October Country*. New York, Ballantine, 1955 ; London, Hart Davis, 1956 ; with a new introduction by the author. New York, Ballantine Books, 1996 .
- *Dandelion Wine*. New York, Doubleday, and London, Hart Davis, 1957 ; New York, Avon Books, 1999 .
- *A Medicine for Melancholy*. New York, Doubleday, 1959 .
- *The Day It Rained Forever*. London, Hart Davis, 1959 .
- *The Machineries of Joy*. New York, Simon and Schuster, and London, Hart Davis, 1964 .
- *The Vintage Bradbury*. New York, Random House, 1965 .
- *The Autumn People*. New York, Ballantine, 1965 .
- *Tomorrow Midnight*. New York, Ballantine, 1966 .
- *Twice Twenty Two* (selection). New York, Doubleday, 1966 .
- *I Sing the Body Electric!* New York, Knopf, 1969 ; London, Hart Davis, 1970 ; published as *I Sing the Body Electric and Other Stories*, New York, Avon Books, 1998 .
- *Bloch and Bradbury*, with Robert Bloch. New York, Tower, 1969 ; as *Fever Dreams and Other Fantasies*, London, Sphere, 1970 .
- *Selected Stories*, edited by Anthony Adams. London, Harrap, 1975 .
- *Long after Midnight*. New York, Knopf, 1976 ; London, Hart Davis MacGibbon, 1977 .
- *The Best of Bradbury*. New York, Bantam, 1976 .
- *To Sing Strange Songs*. Exeter, Devon, Wheaton, 1979 .
- *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*. New York, Knopf, and London, Granada, 1980 .
- *The Last Circus, and The Electrocution*. Northridge, California, Lord John Press, 1980 .
- *Dinosaur Tales*. New York, Bantam, 1983 .
- *A Memory of Murder*. New York, Dell, 1984 .
- *The Toynbee Convector*. New York, Knopf, 1988 ; London, Grafton, 1989 .

## Plays

- *The Meadow*, in *Best One-Act Plays of 1947-48*, edited by Margaret Mayorga. New York, Dodd Mead, 1948 .
- *The Anthem Sprinters and Other Antics* (produced Los Angeles, 1968 ). New York, Dial Press, 1963 .
- *The World of Ray Bradbury* (produced Los Angeles, 1964 ; New York, 1965 ).
- *The Wonderful Ice-Cream Suit* (produced Los Angeles, 1965 ; New York, 1987 ; musical version, music by Jose Feliciano, produced Pasadena, California, 1990 ). Included in *The Wonderful Ice-Cream Suit and Other Plays*, 1972 .

- *The Day It Rained Forever*, music by Bill Whitefield (produced Edinburgh, 1988 ). New York, French, 1966 .
- *The Pedestrian*. New York, French, 1966 .
- *Christus Apollo*, music by Jerry Goldsmith (produced Los Angeles, 1969 ).
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- *The Gift* (*Steve Canyon* series), 1958
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- *The Haunted Computer and the Android Pope*. New York, Knopf, and London, Granada, 1981 .
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- *Switch on the Night*. New York, Pantheon, and London, Hart Davis, 1955 .
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- *Ray Bradbury: An American Icon* (video cassette), Great Northern Productions, 1996 .
- *Ray Bradbury and the Poetics of Reverie* by William F. Toupence, San Bernardino, California, Borgo Press, 1998
- *American Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers* by Claire L. Datnow, Springfield, New Jersey, Enslow Publishers, 1999
- *Ray Bradbury: A Critical Companion* by Robin Anne Reid, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2000 .
- *Ray Bradbury*, edited by Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House, 2000 .

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# Ray(mond) (Douglas) Bradbury

 Contemporary Popular Writers, 1997

Updated: July 24, 2008

**Born:** August 22, 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois, United States

**Died:** June 05, 2012 in Los Angeles, California, United States

**Other Names:** Bradbury, Ray Douglas; Banat, D.R.; Douglas, Leonard; Elliott, William (American writer, 1920-); Spaulding, Douglas; Spaulding, Leonard; Bradbury, Raymond Douglas; Sterling, Brett (American writer, 1920-); Bradbury, Raymond

**Nationality:** American

**Occupation:** Writer

**Nationality:** American. **Born:** Waukegan, Illinois, 22 August 1920. **Education:** Los Angeles High School, graduated 1938. **Family:** Married Marguerite Susan McClure in 1947; four daughters. **Career:** Since 1943 full-time writer. President, Science-Fantasy Writers of America, 1951-53. Member of the Board of Directors, Screen Writers Guild of America, 1957-61. Lives in Los Angeles. **Awards:** O. Henry prize, 1947, 1948; Benjamin Franklin award, 1954; American Academy award, 1954; Boys' Clubs of America Junior Book award, 1956; Golden Eagle award, for screenplay, 1957; Ann Radcliffe award, 1965, 1971; Writers Guild award, 1974; Aviation and Space Writers award, for television documentary, 1979; Gandalf award, 1980; Nebula Grand Master, 1988; Bram Stoker Life Achievement award, 1989. D.Litt.: Whittier College, California, 1979. **Agent:** Harold Matson Company, 276 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10001. **Address:** c/o Bantam, 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10103, U.S.A.

A prolific writer of long and short fiction, Ray Bradbury often serves as an introduction to science fiction for elementary and junior high school students (though critics prefer to call him a writer of fantasy, not of science fiction), and with good reason. His short stories are well-written and highly accessible. Still, Bradbury has not received much attention from literary scholars who view him as a popular writer within a popular genre. And he has failed, particularly with his later novels, to achieve the acclaim garnered by his earliest works.

Among those early titles are Bradbury's most noted works *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1954). *The Martian Chronicles* depicts a group of Earthlings who colonize Mars. The group meets a sorry fate, not just at the hands of marauding Martians (who kill Captain Black), but also as a result of their unwillingness to adapt to their new surroundings. They hope to merely transfer their small towns and their accompanying lifestyles from Earth to Mars. However, the differences between the two planets are too great to accommodate the colonists' wishes. This juxtaposition of the past and the future is a major theme in Bradbury's writing.

The highly acclaimed *Fahrenheit 451* is centered on the still-lingering effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. The plot involves a firefighter whose job is to burn books and therefore discourage people from venturing beyond their four-wall televisions. The firefighter meets a young woman who is curious about the world around her. She influences him to begin reading books, and what follows is a tragic set of circumstances. After he rebels against a society intent on hiding the truths of censorship, government-sanctioned violence, and nuclear war, he commits a murder and is forced to flee into the country. In effect, the light emanating from the fires

illuminates a world darkened by suppression.

Bradbury's short stories, though they have not received as much critical attention as his early novels, are perhaps more important because of how widely they are read, particularly by children and teenagers. Nearly every anthology used in language arts classes contains a story or two by Bradbury. Bradbury's precocious children are often disrespectful to their elders, but Lahna Diskin points out that the adults they treat poorly "are people whose authenticity they doubt." Adults who are genuine and whose lives children feel they can emulate are highly respected. Consider "The Veldt," in which George and Lydia Hadley have remodeled their children's playroom to resemble an African veldt, complete with the requisite vegetation and wildlife. "Nothing's too good for our children," George tells his wife. However, in the end the parents' extravagance gets the best of them. The story ends with horrifying, yet deserved, results.

"The Illustrated Man" (1951) is an eerie tale of a man who loses and then regains his job at a circus by transforming from a too-heavy-to-work tent man to a highly decorated freakshow inhabitant via a sudden preponderance of tattoos. Besides being a nuisance to his wife and a wonder to audiences, the tattoos function as mutable fortune tellers. They take the form of conventional tattoos (traced in ink on the man's body), but they are not permanent in that they change shape according to whatever event is being foretold. Not surprisingly, the tattoos are a hit with the circus audiences. However, as with any of Bradbury's stories, they also carry many surprising implications.

Bradbury uses such stories not only to entertain, but to cause readers to think about their own lives. Though Bradbury's topics are hardly true-to-life, they do carry with them themes that we can apply to our daily lives--courteousness, perseverance, flexibility, and self-awareness. These are some of the many lessons that parents and teachers hope to convey to children. The liberal use of adult characters also points toward Bradbury's desire for grown-ups to learn these lessons, sometimes from children.

## Publications

### Novels

- *Fahrenheit 451*. New York, Ballantine, 1953 ; London, Hart Davis, 1954 .
- *Dandelion Wine*. New York, Doubleday, and London, Hart Davis, 1957 .
- *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1962 ; London, Hart Davis, 1963 .
- *Death Is a Lonely Business*. New York, Knopf, 1985 ; London, Grafton, 1986 .
- *A Graveyard for Lunatics: Another Tale of Two Cities*. New York, Knopf, and London, Grafton, 1990 .
- *The Smile*. Mankato, Minnesota, Creative Education, 1991 .
- *Green Shadows, White Whale*. New York, Knopf, and London, HarperCollins, 1992 .

### Short Stories

- *Dark Carnival*. Sauk City, Wisconsin, Arkham House, 1947 ; abridged edition, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1948 ; abridged edition, as *The Small Assassin*, London, New English Library, 1962 .

- *The Martian Chronicles*. New York, Doubleday, 1950 ; as *The Silver Locusts*, London, Hart Davis, 1951 .
- *The Illustrated Man*. New York, Doubleday, 1951 ; London, Hart Davis, 1952 .
- *The Golden Apples of the Sun*. New York, Doubleday, and London, Hart Davis, 1953 .
- *The October Country*. New York, Ballantine, 1955 ; London, Hart Davis, 1956 .
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- *The Vintage Bradbury*. New York, Random House, 1965 .
- *The Autumn People*. New York, Ballantine, 1965 .
- *Tomorrow Midnight*. New York, Ballantine, 1966 .
- *Twice Twenty Two* (selection). New York, Doubleday, 1966 .
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- *The Best of Bradbury*. New York, Bantam, 1976 .
- *To Sing Strange Songs*. Exeter, Devon, Wheaton, 1979 .
- *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*. New York, Knopf, and London, Granada, 1980 .
- *The Last Circus, and The Electrocution*. Northridge, California, Lord John Press, 1980 .
- *Dinosaur Tales*. New York, Bantam, 1983 .
- *A Memory of Murder*. New York, Dell, 1984 .
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- *The Anthem Sprinters and Other Antics* (produced Los Angeles, 1968 ). New York, Dial Press, 1963 .
- *The World of Ray Bradbury* (produced Los Angeles, 1964 ; New York, 1965 ).
- *The Wonderful Ice-Cream Suit* (produced Los Angeles, 1965 ; New York, 1987 ; musical version, music by Jose Feliciano, produced Pasadena, California, 1990 ).
- *The Day It Rained Forever*, music by Bill Whitefield (produced Edinburgh, 1988 ). New York, French, 1966 .
- *The Pedestrian*. New York, French, 1966 .
- *Christus Apollo*, music by Jerry Goldsmith (produced Los Angeles, 1969 ).
- *The Wonderful Ice-Cream Suit and Other Plays* (includes *The Veldt* and *To the Chicago Abyss* ). New York, Bantam, 1972 ; London, Hart Davis, 1973 .
- *The Veldt* (produced London, 1980 ).

- *Leviathan 99* (produced Los Angeles, 1972 ).
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**Title:**

Overview: *Fahrenheit 451: The Temperature at Which Books Burn*  
Novel, 1953

**Publication Information**

American Writer (1920 - 2012)

**Other Names Used:**

Bradbury, Ray Douglas; Banat, D.R.; Douglas, Leonard; Elliott, William (American writer, 1920-); Spaulding, Douglas; Spaulding, Leonard; Bradbury, Raymond Douglas; Sterling, Brett (American writer, 1920-); Bradbury, Raymond;

**Source:**

*Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them*. Joyce Moss and George Wilson. Vol. 5: *Civil Rights Movements to Future Times* (1960-2000). Detroit: Gale, 1997. From *Literature Resource Center*.  
Work overview

**Document Type:****Full Text:**

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COPYRIGHT 1997 Joyce Moss and George Wilson, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale

When Ray Bradbury (1920—) graduated from high school, he was already committed to a writing career in science fiction. From the beginning his short stories and novels showed a personal concern about what Bradbury perceived as the dehumanizing effect of the rapid growth of technology. Themes of evil, or at least misused technology, and victory of the human spirit are the focus of *Fahrenheit 451*.

**Events in History at the Time of the Novel****An Uncertain Era**

Bradbury wrote the story that would grow into *Fahrenheit 451* in 1950, a time when relations between the world's two most powerful nations were uneasy. In what would come to be known as the Cold War, the tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States—essentially a battle between capitalism and communism—were played out on numerous economic, political, and territorial fronts around the world, but primarily in Europe. The end of World War II five years earlier and the resulting disagreements about how to divide the spoils of war in a devastated Europe, and which system would win out there, had launched the Cold War. A scramble for spheres of influence, beginning with Germany, divided Europe and set in motion a world competition that was to last through the century. In 1945, the provisional French president Charles de Gaulle had allowed the country's communist party to be included in its newly recreated political system. Only a year later, the West, to its alarm, discovered that the communist party was one of the three largest political parties in France. In another part of the world, China's communist party—in control of 100 million people in North China by the end of the war—grew until it overwhelmed its opponents in 1949 and proclaimed the country the People's Republic of China, a communist nation.

Back in 1946, the wartime prime minister of Great Britain, Sir Winston Churchill, speaking in the United States, warned that an "iron curtain" had closed Eastern Europe to the view of the West. Behind this curtain, Josef Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, bolstered communist ideology by destroying books that depicted life and history in the non-communist West in a too-favorable light, and by forbidding future publication of such books. It was a policy that had been practiced with some success by Adolf Hitler during the 1930s as he created a fascist dictatorship in Germany. Soviet censorship made the events behind the iron curtain difficult or impossible for the Western world to monitor, and as a result average citizens of the noncommunist world had a fearful view of the communist system. Distrust among the former wartime allies grew partly as a result of what was unknown on each side.

*Fahrenheit 451* is a story built around book-burning, but that action is representative of all sorts of censorship. As the author states in a coda to the novel, "The point is obvious. There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running out with lit matches" (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, p. 176).



After World War II, the threat of communism led to a panic in the United States as rumors surfaced about communist spies active in Canada. A U.S. House of Representatives member from California, Richard Nixon, had won election in 1946 by suggesting communist leanings of his opponent. In Washington he gained prominence on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), an investigative body set up to look into possible communist elements in the government. Prodded by Congress, President Harry Truman directed the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Civil Service Commission to investigate the loyalty of all federal employees. Some 3 million workers came under the inspection of government agencies—yet just 300 were dismissed for disloyal ideas while 2,900 resigned their positions in protest. The government desire to weed out any “foreign” ideas grew as Whittaker Chambers, an editor of *Time* magazine and a confessed Soviet spy, accused Alger Hiss, a former State Department official, of providing classified documents for transmittal to the Soviets during this decade. Hiss denied the charges but in 1950 was convicted of lying under oath, for which a federal court sentenced him to five years in prison. Back in Congress, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy carried on and escalated the virtual witchhunts that had begun with Nixon and the HUAC. McCarthy became especially focused on finding communists in the State Department and then the U.S. Army.

There was a frenzy to eliminate any ideas suspected of socialist or communist leanings, and as a result some ninety mostly harmless or even useful organizations were listed by the U.S. attorney general as wellsprings of communist doctrine. Attempts to censor news sources resulted in blacklists of writers and performers in the motion picture, radio, newspaper, and fledgling television industries. These frantic attempts to censor ideas grew from 1950 to 1953 as Senator McCarthy continued to pursue his destructive investigation of almost everyone with whom he disagreed and produced long lists of people with imagined connections to communism. *Fahrenheit 451* stands as a type of protest against such activity and the threat it poses of establishing the “Tyranny of the Majority” and enforcing conformity (Mogen, p. 107).

### *The Atom Bomb*

The end of World War II was hastened by the Allied use of the atom bomb, a new device of mass destruction dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In a single bombing of Hiroshima, some 60,000 people were killed, allegedly saving many times that number of lives that might otherwise have been lost in an extended war. The bombings, however, left nations with a lingering fear that an enemy might develop a similar weapon and use it elsewhere. The United Nations, formed in 1945 as an international political body to maintain world peace, addressed the issue of regulating atomic weaponry soon afterward. In 1949, Cold War tensions increased dramatically when the Soviet Union successfully detonated an atomic bomb of its own.

Meanwhile wartime advances in technology led to improved aircraft and rocketry, making the delivery of atomic bombs possible from nearly every place on earth to any target. U.S. and Soviet scientists raced to improve both the weapons and the speed with which they could be delivered. In the Soviet Union, fighter planes reached speeds of 684 miles an hour. The United States countered with reconnaissance planes capable of flying at more than 500 miles per hour at very high altitudes.

The aircraft carrying weapons to the city in *Fahrenheit 451* fly at speeds of 5,000 miles per hour and carry such bomb loads that war, once declared, is over in a few seconds.

### *Television*

After World War II, what had been only experimental forays into television broadcasting evolved into a full-scale industry, and the popularity of the new medium grew astronomically. In 1946 there were about a dozen broadcasting stations in the entire United States and a few thousand viewers, who viewed the programs on screens so small that most required a magnifying glass mounted in front of the picture. Within ten years, there were about 450 stations in the United States broadcasting programs to 34 million receiving sets watched by more than 100 million viewers.

To the citizens of *Fahrenheit 451*, television is as big as life and disseminates all knowledge the government allows creating a “family” that comes to include the viewers. Television has become so pervasive that one resident of the fictional city, ex-professor Faber, longs for and builds a miniature receiver—one that he can cover with his hand. *Fahrenheit 451*, as well as other stories by Ray Bradbury, have conveyed his concern that such services as television and computers could fall into powerful hands that would use them to manipulate the human population. Indeed, early television appeared at first to be headed in that direction. Licensing became a tool for restricting television in the United States, while Great Britain, Canada, the Soviet Union, and Japan established government-controlled networks.

*Fahrenheit 451* carries television technology into the future. The time setting for the story is unspecified but clues in the story suggest that it is a not-too-distant future. Trains, for example, no longer exist in the city but the tracks are still whole and identifiable. People show great enthusiasm for television, much as they did in the 1950s. Their sets, however, grow beyond the dimensions of sets in the 1950s or even the 1990s. In the story, some screens serve as an entire wall inside private homes, while more prosperous citizens build television rooms that resemble cinerama, surrounding the viewer on four sides.



## Other Technologies

In 1950 computers were still almost novelties. Enormous, room-sized configurations of vacuum tubes and switches were beginning to solve complex mathematical problems. The computers were bulky and large. Still, *Fahrenheit 451* imagines a computer so small that it can be used to direct a robot's movements and be programmed to sense and track a million different human scents.

Between 1950 and the future time of *Fahrenheit 451*, video and computer technologies have advanced to challenge the old ways of delivering information that once appeared only in book form. *Fahrenheit 451* reveals a concern for this change. Television is the sole source of information in Ray Montag's city, and a computerized dog tracks down book lovers so that books can be destroyed by fire. In the real world, however, the newer technologies seem to have made books more accessible than in 1950. The number of books published in 1985, for example, was more than four times the number published thirty-five years earlier.

Furthermore, censorship of ideas has relaxed somewhat with the passage of time. There had been various laws against publishing so-called traitorous or lewd printed matter in the United States since colonial times. In force at the time of the writing of *Fahrenheit 451* was the Smith Act. Passed in 1940, the act outlawed printed matter that urged or advocated the overthrow or destruction of the national government or any of the state governments by force or violence. A 1951 Supreme Court ruling (*Dennis v. United States*) declared the Smith Act to be constitutional, and it was invoked in the virulent anti-communist campaign that swept the nation in the early 1950s. In 1957, a few years after the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*, the Supreme Court would modify the Smith Act, ruling that it could not be used to punish someone who merely advocates prohibited activities; to break the law a person actually had to engage in them. Senator McCarthy's anticommunist campaign was discredited and the emptiness of his charges exposed in 1954. With his downfall, the anticommunist fervor lessened in the United States. In Bradbury's view, though, the danger of censorship lurked elsewhere in the world, and so the novel's relevance seems to be timeless: "For while Senator McCarthy has long been dead, the Red Guard in China comes alive and ... books are thrown to the furnace all over again. So it will go, one generation printing, another generation burning, yet another remembering what is good to remember so as to print again" (Bradbury in Mogen, p. 107). Communist China under Mao Zedong (Tse-Tung) was an especially apt model of censorship practices over the decades. Authorities suppressed writing that did not further government aims or that expressed "Western" ideas, and book banning and burning reached a fevered pitch during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Restrictions were relaxed over the decade, then reimposed in the 1980s; one generation printing books and the next one "burning" them, so to speak, just as Bradbury predicted.

## The Novel in Focus

### The Plot

Ray Montag, the story's protagonist, is a fireman in a large city. The role of firefighter, however, has become very specialized. The city's buildings are sheeted with fireproof materials so that firemen no longer need to worry about extinguishing blazes. Instead Ray and his co-workers, including a robot dog, ferret out books and burn them under orders from the government. This the firemen do with great pleasure—even as the city is threatened with total destruction by greatly expanded nuclear bomb loads carried by supersonic planes capable of speeds of 5,000 miles an hour.

For most of the citizens, the book-burning seems acceptable, even desirable. They receive all the information that the government feels is good for them through state-run television. The only acceptable thoughts come from the television "family," for whom books are the enemy. The players on television become very real members of the family in each household (which, more often than not, lacks children—children have become unpopular in this society). Relief from the monotony of this television-locked world comes in the form of mind-numbing drugs. In this atmosphere, Ray's wife, Millicent, along with many of her friends, becomes a pill addict.

The drug problem has grown so that the city's medical workers respond to a dozen calls each day to rescue people, mostly women, who have overdosed. It is such a common occurrence that doctors do not respond to the calls but send medical mechanics to do the work. Two technicians frequently rescue Millie. In the end, she lives to denounce her own husband, calling the firemen to report his cache of books.

On one occasion, the firemen are tipped that an old woman has books stored in her attic. A raid proves that to be true, and the books are burned. The law requires that the old woman be taken away and the entire house be set ablaze. But the woman resists by deliberately setting fire to the home and to herself. Ray is very shaken by the sight of the old woman burning to death in defense of her own ideals. He begins to wonder how the book-burning began and why most of the people of the city came to believe in it.

A chance acquaintance with Clarisse McClellan, an almost-seventeen-year-old girl who wants to live freely and question everything, changes Ray's life. He becomes curious about books and how their censorship began. An answer comes from a least likely source. Captain Beatty is at the moment a dedicated fireman, but he has obviously read books and, sometime in his life, loved them. It is Beatty who explains how the practice begins over and over throughout history. First there is conditioning—by television



in his own city and by picture books and sports. People are inundated with nonthinking activities. "More sports for everyone, group spirit, fun, and you don't have to think, eh? ... More cartoons in books. More pictures. The mind drinks less and less" (*Fahrenheit 451*, p. 57).

Another issue, according to Captain Beatty, made books expendable or even undesirable, at least items that no one cared about enough to purchase.

Now let's take up the minorities in our civilization, shall we? Bigger the population, the more minorities. Don't step on the toes of the dog lovers, the cat lovers, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico.... The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy, remember that! All the minor minor minorities with their navels to be kept clean. Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters.

(*Fahrenheit 451*, p. 57)

In the frenzy to appease everyone, books become empty shells and no one cares when they are banned or burned.

Ray grows more curious and begins to read. This is permitted of a fireman for a short time, but Ray becomes committed to saving books. He soon falls victim to the robot; his stolen books are discovered and his home destroyed. Even as enemy bombers approach the city, Ray is forced to run from his fellow firemen, choosing to follow a river and then an abandoned railroad track out of the city. From a distance he watches the entire city explode under the superbombs. Ray follows the abandoned tracks away from the city until he finds a group of scholars who have a unique way of preserving the information in the destroyed books.

### *Book Burning and the Human Spirit*

In the decade before the novel was published, there was plenty of evidence of "people running about with lit matches," as Bradbury discussed in the novel's coda. Adolf Hitler in Germany and Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union had used book-burning demonstrations to rally supporters and intimidate those with opposing views. Authors had been suppressed through state-directed writers' organizations. Persistent writers with challenging views were thrown into jails or exiled. Then, in the United States, "book-burning" took the path of psychological persecution as meted out by Senator Joseph McCarthy in his anticommunist campaign.

No matter how oppressive the book bannings, however, there were always those who resisted censorship. Prominent writers and actors, for example, resisted McCarthy by refusing to testify before his Senate committee at the risk of being banished from their trade. The people of *Fahrenheit 451* accept book-burning—except for a few citizens of the city. The firemen's official activities provide brief diversions when flames shoot up and the robot hound equipped with a hypodermic-needle tongue paralyzes the offending book-lover. Yet even under these conditions humane people of courage and intellect appear again and again in *Fahrenheit 451*. The story tells of a future world dominated not only by electronic media and superweapons, but by the indomitable human spirit capable of ultimate victory over machines and technology. The human spirit is revealed by Clarisse, the teenager who refuses to stop thinking, enjoying nature, and questioning. Ray, the fireman, is infected by this free spirit, and her mysterious disappearance is a stimulus to him and leads to his daring to collect books.

Another encounter with the undying human spirit comes when Ray meets the elderly ex-professor Faber. He has kept his mind active by inventing useful electronic tools such as miniature radio receiver-transmitters and small television receivers. This old gentleman helps Ray plot to revive the printing of books and, when that endeavor comes too late, to escape punishment for his book-reading. The ultimate victory of humanity over technology, however, is reflected in Ray's encounter with a group of campers along the railroad tracks. They are scholars dedicated to a single purpose. Members are admitted to this impressive group if they have committed to memory any part of the world's great literature. Collectively, they plan to preserve the world's knowledge in the face of government persecution and nuclear holocaust.

### *Sources*

Direct sources for *Fahrenheit 451* are Bradbury's own tales. In 1947 he wrote the short story "Bright Phoenix" about a small town whose inhabitants defy government book-burnings by each committing to memory one of the texts. This idea of government book-burners grew into a novella called *The Fireman*, which appeared in the magazine *Galaxy Science Fiction* in 1951 before finally being developed into the novel *Fahrenheit 451*.

Horror at the rise of Adolf Hitler is what inspired the novel's original premise. In Bradbury's view, burning books was burning people. "When Hitler burned a book," said Bradbury, "I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as burning a human, for in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh" (Bradbury in Mogen, p. 107).

That Bradbury's concern was more about the suppression of ideas than the destruction of books per se is evident from his attitude to

new technologies. Over the years, Bradbury seems to have softened his position on technology, although he still refuses to learn to drive an automobile. In an interview in the 1990s, Bradbury was asked if he thought books were in danger from the new computer and television technology. By then Bradbury had accepted the electronic medium. Books, audiotapes, videotapes—in his view, they were all forms of literature.

### *The Novel's Reception*

*Fahrenheit 451* was published in 1953. Ray Bradbury had already gained writing fame with a series of stories called *The Martian Chronicles*. The new novel, therefore, had a ready audience of science fiction addicts and Bradbury fans.

Critics, however, were only mildly positive toward the book. Its publication only a few years after the birth of the atomic age placed it in the realm of dystopian literature, works about wretched or miserable imaginary places. *Fahrenheit 451* was soon being compared with other books in this genre, notably with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (also covered in *Literature and Its Times*). Critics focused on a perceived weakness in the novel—too rapid and inadequate character development and identification of events. But finding positive elements in the novel as well, they generally accepted it as a worthwhile work. In a review, critic Kingsley Amis wrote, “The book emerges quite creditably from a comparison with *Nineteen Eighty Four* as inferior in power, but superior in consciousness and objectivity” (Amis in Bryfonski, p. 68). A review in the *Nation* (December 19, 1953) praised the novel as one of the most brilliant social satires to be published in recent times. Perhaps most importantly, Bradbury succeeded in meeting his own goal—to rewrite the original novella, *The Fireman*, into a longer story that retained the intense pace of his shorter fiction. The result, again in Amis's words, is a “fast and scaring narrative” (Amis in Mogen, p. 110).

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American Writer ( 1920 - 2012 )

**Author(s):** Eric Wetzel

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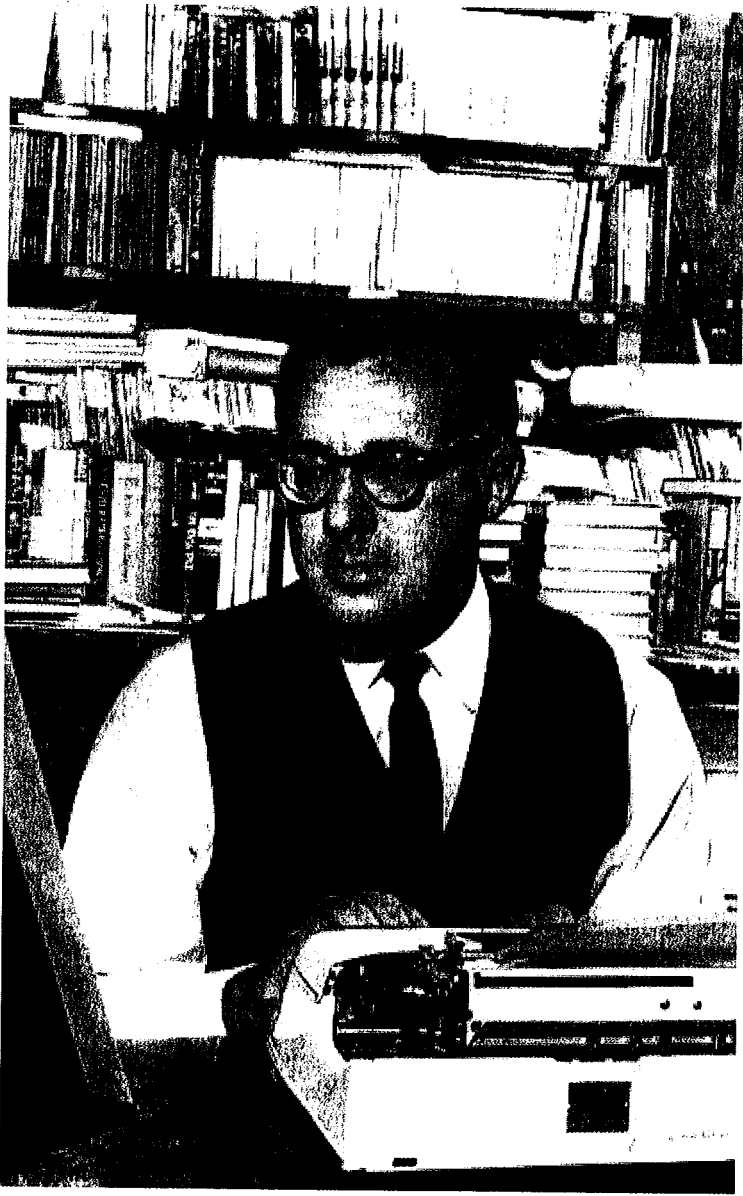
Full Text:

RAY BRADBURY WAS A TEENAGER sitting in a Los Angeles movie theater when he first saw newsreel footage of the Nazis burning books on the streets of Berlin. That moment is often noted as the earliest inspiration for Fahrenheit 451, his monumental 1953 novel about a future world where reading is outlawed. But there's more to the story.

Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois, in 1920. After the Depression hit, his father moved the family to Los Angeles in search of work. The fourteen-year-old Bradbury loved his new life: He spent his days roller-skating to movie premieres and the Brown Derby, a legendary celebrity hangout, to pester George Burns and other film stars for autographs. (Later, on his Burns and Allen radio show, the actor featured a sketch Bradbury had written and given to him.) After graduating from high school, Bradbury couldn't afford college, so he spent much of the next three years hanging out at a place he now calls the center of his life: the library. He read voraciously across many subjects, giving himself what Garyn Roberts, a Michigan professor who is working on a biography of the author, equates with a liberal-arts education. So today, when Bradbury recalls the story of the burning of the great library in Alexandria, Egypt--a tale he discovered around the time Hitler was marching across Europe, and one that has stuck with him--he feels personally offended. "It's like you're burning my alma mater," he says.

To write Fahrenheit 451, Bradbury returned to themes he had explored in short stories such as "Usher II," the tale of an Edgar Allan Poe fan who kills a group of book censors using methods taken from some of Poe's stories. But the most direct precursor to Fahrenheit 451 was a 1950 Bradbury novella entitled The Fireman. The story's protagonist, Guy Montag, is a fireman in an unusual sense of the word: He doesn't fight fires, he sets them. His job is to burn books belonging to citizens whose personal collections have been discovered.

Appropriately enough, Bradbury wrote The Fireman in a library--a library basement, to be precise. The author was accustomed to writing at home, but playing with his children became too much of a distraction. So he relocated to a subterranean typing room in a UCLA library, where he rented a machine for ten cents per half-hour. ("I didn't know it," Bradbury writes in the afterword, "but I was literally writing a dime novel.") He arrived at around 10 a.m. every day and typed for four or five hours, taking occasional breaks, he says, to "run up and down the stairs" in search of the books from which he drew many of the literary quotes sprinkled throughout the novella (and, later, Fahrenheit 451). Several of these quotes are delivered by Beatty, Montag's strangely bookish fire chief.



Bradbury's love of literature wasn't the only impulse behind the novel, of course. The book was written during an era when "pro-communist" literature and left-leaning writers, actors and other public figures were under attack by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. The author was a member of the Screen Writers Guild, a prime target of McCarthy and his allies, and some critics have suggested that the anticommunist mania galvanized the normally apolitical Bradbury even more than his memories of the previous decade's fascists.

In any case, after nine days Bradbury left the UCLA library, \$9.80 lighter but having finished the novella. The Fireman was soon published in a seminal sci-fi magazine called *Galaxy*, and later, at the urging of his book publisher, Bradbury expanded it into *Fahrenheit 451*. To do it, Bradbury revealed in a recent interview, he simply retyped the novella without thinking too hard about what he was doing; new ideas simply came to him in the process. Published in 1953 and serialized in three early issues of *Playboy*, *Fahrenheit 451* ended up being about twice as long as *The Fireman*.

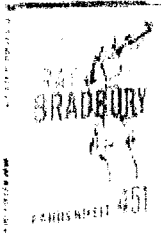
Although Bradbury plays down the prophetic nature of his work ("I don't predict, I prevent," he says), his book remains an amazingly accurate piece of futurism. The Chicago of the novel is filled with devices we now call automated teller machines, and its police chases are televised. One of the book's other prophecies was self-fulfilling: The Sony engineer who invented the Walkman in the 1970s was reportedly inspired by Bradbury's Seashell radio--a set of in-ear music transmitters favored by Montag's wife, Mildred. And Bradbury even hinted at the rise of political correctness: In explaining to Montag how books came to be banned, Beatty says that the media became less and less adept at dealing with the controversies caused whenever "the minor minor minorities" became offended at something in print. Authors, he claims, "locked up" their typewriters out of fear.

Bradbury is now eighty-three and recently suffered a stroke, so he rarely makes trips to the library anymore, at least to read. (He and his wife have so many books at home these days that going elsewhere for literary nourishment would be pointless.) But he has,

however, gotten out and spoken at more than a hundred library fundraisers, mostly around Southern California. He owes books a debt of gratitude--and he's overjoyed, he says, to see his ode to them tam fifty. "It just feels great. Thank God I'm alive to see the day."

#### 1953 The Year the Book Came Out

Joseph Stalin dies \*\* A postage stamp costs three cents \*\* The New York Yankees beat the Brooklyn Dodgers in the World Series  
\*\* Lucille Ball gives birth to Desi Arnaz Jr. \*\* Ernest Hemingway wins the Pulitzer Prize for *The Old Man and the Sea* \*\* The structure of DNA is discovered \*\* Edmund Hillary and sherpa Tenzing Norgay reach the summit of Mt. Everest



\*\* This copy of *Fahrenheit 451*, a first edition signed by Ray Bradbury, was available at press time at Between the Covers Rare Books in Merchantville, New Jersey (856-665-2284, [www.betweenthecovers.com](http://www.betweenthecovers.com)) for \$4,500.

Wetzel, Eric

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