

Anticipating *Fahrenheit 451*

Preface:

When did science fiction first cross over from genre writing to the mainstream of American literature? Almost certainly it happened on October 19, 1953, when a young Californian named Ray Bradbury published a novel with the odd title of *Fahrenheit 451*. In a gripping story at once disturbing and poetic, Bradbury takes the materials of pulp fiction and transforms them into a visionary parable of a society gone awry, in which firemen burn books and the state suppresses learning. Meanwhile, the citizenry sits by in a drug-induced and media-saturated indifference. More relevant than ever a half-century later, *Fahrenheit 451* has achieved the rare distinction of being both a literary classic and a perennial bestseller

The Importance of Biography:

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. For example, authors often integrate their personal experience into a story. *Fahrenheit 451* is, in some ways, the author's tribute to the role that books and libraries have played in his life. After all, Bradbury wrote hundreds of works (novels, stories, screenplays, essays, and poems) with only a high school education and a worn out library card. However, while we more fully understand the book as we learn about the author, the artistry of the novel does not succeed or fail based on the author's life. The novel—a work of art—has an internal structure independent of the author's personality.

Biography Assignment:

In groups you are to read aloud the assigned essay. After reading it together, discuss the essay and, on a large piece of paper, make notes on what it says and what you have learned from it to present to the class. Do your best to add a creative twist to make your presentation memorable.

Furthermore, each group needs to formulate their own answer to the question below:

The novel begins: “[I]t was a pleasure to burn.” Why does Bradbury start the novel in this way? Why might it be more pleasurable to burn books rather than read them?

Literature and Censorship

"The paper burns, but the words fly away." These words about book burning from the martyred rabbi Akiba Ben Joseph appear on one wall of Ray Bradbury's beloved Los Angeles Public Library—itsself the survivor of a horrific 1986 fire. They also underscore a truth too often ignored: Censorship almost never works. Banning or burning a book may take it out of circulation temporarily, but it usually makes people even more curious to read the work in question. Under Joseph Stalin and his successors, Russia banned questionable books and killed or imprisoned their authors, yet underground or *samizdat* editions passed from hand to hand and ultimately helped topple the Soviet system. Adolf Hitler exhorted his followers to burn books by Jewish or "subversive" authors, but the best of those books have outlasted Nazi Germany by a good sixty years. In an added irony, accounts of Nazi book burnings helped inspire *Fahrenheit 451*, one of the most haunting denunciations of censorship in all literature.

How ironic, too, that Bradbury's own indictment of censorship has itself been repeatedly censored. Fourteen years after *Fahrenheit 451*'s initial release, some educators succeeded in persuading its publisher to release a special edition. This edition modified more than seventy-five passages to eliminate mild curse words, and to "clean up" two incidents in the book. (A minor character, for example, was changed from "drunk" to "sick.") When Bradbury learned of the changes, he demanded that the publishers withdraw the censored version, and they complied. Since 1980, only Bradbury's original text has been available. As a result, some schools have banned the book from course lists. For all these attempts to sanitize or banish it completely, Bradbury has remained diligent in his defense of his masterpiece, writing in a coda that appears in some editions of the book:

"Do not insult me with the beheadings, finger-choppings or the lung-deflations you plan for my works. I need my head to shake or nod, my hand to wave or make into a fist, my lungs to shout or whisper with. I will not go gently onto a shelf, degutted, to become a non-book."

Ray Bradbury (b. 1920)

Ray Douglas Bradbury was born on August 22, 1920, in Waukegan, Illinois into a family that once included a seventeenth-century Salem woman tried for witchcraft. The Bradbury family drove across the country to Los Angeles in 1934, with young Ray piling out of their jalopy at every stop to plunder the local library in search of L. Frank Baum's Oz books.

In 1936, Bradbury experienced a rite of passage familiar to most science-fiction readers: the realization that he was not alone. At a secondhand bookstore in Hollywood, he discovered a handbill promoting meetings of the "Los Angeles Science Fiction Society." Thrilled, he joined a weekly Thursday-night conclave that would grow to attract such science-fiction legends as Robert A. Heinlein, Leigh Brackett, and future Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard.

After a rejection notice from the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, he sent his short story "Homecoming" to *Mademoiselle*. There it was spotted by a young editorial assistant named Truman Capote, who rescued the manuscript from the slush pile and helped get it published in the magazine. "Homecoming" won a place in The O. Henry Prize Stories of 1947.

But the most significant event for Bradbury in 1947 was surely the beginning of his long marriage to Marguerite McClure. They had met the previous April in Fowler Brothers Bookstore, where she worked—and where at first she had him pegged for a shoplifter: "Once I figured out that he wasn't stealing books, that was it. I fell for him."

In 1950, Bradbury's second book, *The Martian Chronicles*, took the form of linked stories about the colonization of the red planet. As always in his writing, technology took a back seat to the human stories.

Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451* on a rental typewriter in the basement of UCLA's Lawrence Clark Powell Library, where he had taken refuge from a small house filled with the distractions of two young children. Ballantine editor Stanley Kauffman, later the longtime film critic for *The New Republic* magazine, flew out to Los Angeles to go over the manuscript with Bradbury, plying the sweet-toothed perfectionist author with copious doses of ice cream. The book came out to rapturous reviews. To this day it sells at least 50,000 copies a year and has become a touchstone around the world for readers and writers living under repressive regimes.

In 2004, Bradbury received the National Medal of Arts, a presidential award administered by the National Endowment for the Arts. He accepted a citation recognizing "his gift for language, his insights into the human condition, and his commitment to the freedom of the individual."

Bradbury and His Other Works

Ray Bradbury has published more than eighty books. His first one, *Dark Carnival* (1947), established him as a striking new voice, and three years later *The Martian Chronicles* made him a crucial one. A collection of linked short stories, *Chronicles* represents a typical Bradbury reversal: Rather than a story about a fireman who starts fires, it's a classic invasion scenario, except that Earthlings are the ones invading Mars. Some critics have interpreted it as a shrewd allegory for the suburbanization of Bradbury's Los Angeles and the West, and rank it above *Fahrenheit 451* for subtlety and grace of language. In 1951 Bradbury completed *The Illustrated Man*, his second story collection. Much like *Chronicles*, this book has a framing device that brings these pieces together: a man whose myriad tattoos each become a separate narrative. While his novels still get most of the attention, Bradbury is also a master of short fiction. For example, his short story "A Sound of Thunder" (1952) is probably Bradbury's single most influential story, with its parable of a carelessly squashed prehistoric butterfly that has history-altering consequences. Were it not for *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)—itself an expanded short story—he might well be regarded less as a novelist with several fine stories to his credit than as a fine writer of stories who sometimes dabbles in book-length fiction.

After the success of *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury left the science-fiction world, if only part time, to write *Dandelion Wine* (1957). For twelve years he wrote almost daily about his childhood, and this novel was the result. Set in Green Town, a fictionalized version of his native Waukegan, Illinois, the book centers on twelve-year-old Douglas Spaulding and the summer he spends growing up and recording his life in writing. *Dandelion Wine*, while vastly different from Bradbury's fantasy work, highlights his ability to branch out from the genre for which he remains best known.

Well into his eighties, at an age when many writers are content to tally their royalties and relax, Bradbury was still working. Through the first years of the new millennium, Bradbury has steadily published new fiction alongside several anthologies of his older stories, poems, and essays. The short-story collection *The Cat's Pajamas* appeared in 2004. With a collection of essays right behind it, writer's block was no more a problem than it had ever been. Surrounded by grateful inheritors, he was producing new work in a reading landscape already transformed by his passage through it. Like the butterfly from "A Sound of Thunder," Bradbury's influence will only increase with time.