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 **THE BIG
READ**

SYNOPSIS

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.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

The three main sections of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* all end in fire. The novel focuses on Guy Montag, a fireman. In the first section, we discover that Montag is a professional book burner, expected to start fires instead of putting them out. For years he has done his job obediently and well. Then one day, he is called upon to burn the books of a Mrs. Hudson, who prefers to die rather than leave her library. Furtively, Montag pockets some of her books, haunted by the idea that a life without books might not be worth living after all.

As Montag begins to read deeply for the first time in his life, *Fahrenheit 451*'s second section traces his growing dissatisfaction with the society he is paid to defend. He seeks out the counsel of an old man named Faber, whom he once let off easy on a reading charge. Together they agree to copy a salvaged Bible, in case anything should happen to the original. Montag's boss at the firehouse, Beatty, senses his disenchantment and interrogates him until their confrontation is interrupted by a fire call. Responding to the address, Montag is expected to start a conflagration considerably closer to home.

Fahrenheit 451's final section finds Montag seizing his own fate for the first time. He avenges himself on Beatty and strikes out for the countryside. There he finds a resistance force of readers, each one responsible for memorizing—and thereby preserving—the entire contents of a different book. As they bide their time in hope of a better future, a flash appears on the horizon: While society was staring at full-wall television screens and medicating itself into a coma, the largest fire yet has broken out. The book's three holocausts expand concentrically. The death of a stranger by fire in the first third becomes the destruction of Montag's own house in the second. The implication is that, had Montag paid greater attention to his neighbor's plight, he might not have found himself in the same predicament soon afterward. Trouble down the street leads to trouble at home, and trouble at home to trouble abroad. For a book once

pigeonholed as science fiction, this structural savvy is one more proof that Bradbury started out writing for the pulps and wound up writing for the ages.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS IN *451*

Walden by Henry David Thoreau

A precursor to Granger's philosophy in *Fahrenheit 451*, Thoreau's classic account of the time he spent in a cabin on Walden Pond has inspired generations of iconoclasts to spurn society and take to the wilderness.

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift

Swift's satirical 1726 novel follows the journey of Lemuel Gulliver to a series of fanciful islands, none more improbable than the England he left behind. The Bradburian idea of using a distant world as a mirror to reflect the flaws of one's own society doesn't originate here, but this is one early expression of it.

"Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold

Arnold's enduring poem about a seascape where "ignorant armies clash by night" has also lent lines to Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*, and provided the title for Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*.

The Republic by Plato

The deathless allegory of the cave, where men living in darkness perceive shadows as truth, is unmistakably echoed in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*.

"It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed."

—from *Fahrenheit 451*

CHARACTERS

Guy Montag - A third-generation fireman who suddenly realizes the emptiness of his life and starts to search for meaning in the books he is supposed to be burning. Though he is sometimes rash and has a hard time thinking for himself, he is determined to break free from the oppression of ignorance. He quickly forms unusually strong attachments with anyone who seems receptive to true friendship. His biggest regret in life is not having a better relationship with his wife.

Mildred Montag - Montag's brittle, sickly looking wife. She is obsessed with watching television and refuses to engage in frank conversation with her husband about their marriage or her feelings. Her suicide attempt, which she refuses even to acknowledge, clearly indicates that she harbors a great deal of pain. Small-minded and childish, Mildred does not understand her husband and apparently has no desire to do so.

Captain Beatty - The captain of Montag's fire department. Although he is himself extremely well-read, paradoxically he hates books and people who insist on reading them. He is cunning and devious, and so perceptive that he appears to read Montag's thoughts.

Professor Faber - A retired English professor whom Montag encountered a year before the book opens. Faber still possesses a few precious books and aches to have more. He readily admits that the current state of society is due to the cowardice of people like himself, who would not speak out against book burning when they still could have stopped it. He berates himself for being a coward, but he shows himself capable of acts that require great courage and place him in considerable danger.

Clarisse McClellan - A beautiful seventeen-year-old who introduces Montag to the world's potential for beauty and meaning with her gentle innocence and curiosity. She is an outcast from society because of her odd habits, which include hiking, playing with flowers, and asking questions, but she and her (equally odd) family seem genuinely happy with themselves and each other.

Granger - The leader of the "Book People," the group of hobo intellectuals Montag finds in the country. Granger is intelligent, patient, and confident in the strength of the human spirit. He is committed to preserving literature through the current Dark Age.

Mrs. Phelps - One of Mildred's vapid friends. She is emotionally disconnected from her life, appearing unconcerned when her third husband is sent off to war. Yet she breaks down crying when Montag reads her a poem, revealing suppressed feelings and sensibilities.

Mrs. Bowles - One of Mildred's friends. Like Mrs. Phelps, she does not seem to care deeply about her own miserable life, which includes one divorce, one husband killed in an accident, one husband who commits suicide, and two children who hate her. Both of Mildred's friends are represented as typical specimens of their society.

Stoneman and Black - Two firemen who work with Montag. They share the lean, shadowed look common to all firemen and go about their jobs unquestioningly.

BRADBURY BIOGRAPHY

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.

Continuing to write during his final years, Bradbury also made public appearances that inspired all ages across the country. At many of those celebrated appearances, he exhorted his fans to "Do what you love and love what you do!" He did just that, until his death at age 91.

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRADBURY

On January 5, 2005, Dana Gioia, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, interviewed Ray Bradbury in Los Angeles. An excerpt from their conversation follows.

Dana Gioia: How did you come to write *Fahrenheit 451*?

Ray Bradbury: In 1950, our first baby was born, and in 1951, our second, so our house was getting full of children. It was very loud, it was very wonderful, but I had no money to rent an office. I was wandering around the UCLA library and discovered there was a typing room where you could rent a typewriter for ten cents a half-hour. So I went and got a bag of dimes. The novel began that day, and nine days later it was finished. But my God, what a place to write that book! I ran up and down stairs and grabbed books off the shelf to find any kind of quote and ran back down and put it in the novel. The book wrote itself in nine days, because the library told me to do it.

DG: What was the origin of the idea of books being burned in the novel?

RB: Well, Hitler of course. When I was fifteen, he burnt the books in the streets of Berlin. Then along the way I learned about the libraries in Alexandria burning five thousand years ago. That grieved my soul. Since I'm self-educated, that means my educators—the libraries—are in danger. And if it could happen in Alexandria, if it could happen in Berlin, maybe it could happen somewhere up ahead, and my heroes would be killed.

DG: Decades after *Fahrenheit 451*, do you feel that you predicted the world, in that sense, fairly accurately?

RB: Oh, God. I've never believed in prediction. That's other people's business, someone like H.G. Wells with *The Shape of Things to Come*. I've said it often: I've tried not to predict, but to protect and to prevent. If I can convince people to stop doing what they're doing and go to the library and be sensible, without pontificating and without being self-conscious, that's fine. I can teach people to really know they're alive.

DG: Did you think of this book from the beginning being about the growth, the transformation of Montag's character?

RB: Never for a moment. No. Everything just has to happen because it has to happen. The wonderful irony of the book is that Montag is educated by a teenager. She doesn't know what she is doing. She is a bit of a romantic sap, and she wanders through the world. She's really alive though, you see. That is what is attractive about her. And Montag is attracted to her romantic sappiness.

DG: What do you think the turning point is in this novel, in terms of making Montag come into his new life?

RB: Well, when Mrs. Hudson is willing to burn with her books. That's the turning point, when it's all over and she's willing to die with her loved ones, with her dogs, with her cats, with her books. She gives up her life. She'd rather die than be without them.

DG: If you joined the community that appears at the end of *Fahrenheit 451* and had to commit one book to memory, what book would that be?

RB: It would be *A Christmas Carol*. I think that book has influenced my life more than almost any other book, because it's a book about life, it's a book about death. It's a book about triumph.

DG: Why should people read novels?

RB: Because we are trying to solve the mystery of our loves, no matter what kind you have. Quite often there's an end to it and you have to find a new love. We move from novel to novel.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RAY BRADBURY (1920-2012)

1. 1920s

- 1920: Ray Bradbury is born on August 22.
- 1921: Yevgeny Zamyatin completes his influential science-fiction novel *We*.
- 1926: First issue of *Amazing Stories* comes out. Bradbury will be among its early subscribers.

2. 1930s

- Bradbury starts writing his own Buck Rogers stories.
- 1938: Orson Welles delivers "War of the Worlds" broadcast.
- Nazis burn books across Germany; newsreel footage appalls teenage Bradbury.

3. **1940s**

- 1947: Bradbury marries Marguerite McClure and publishes his first book, *Dark Carnival*.
- 1947: House Un-American Activities Committee investigates the movie industry.
- 1949: Orwell's *1984* published.

4. **1950s**

- Bradbury publishes *The Martian Chronicles* in 1950 and *Fahrenheit 451* in 1953.
- 1954: Kurt Vonnegut breaks in with *Galaxy* magazine.
- Cold War imperils writers' civil liberties in the U.S. and their lives in the Soviet Union.

5. **1960s**

- 1962: Bradbury receives an Oscar nomination for animated short *Icarus Montgolfier Wright*.
- *The Twilight Zone*, *Outer Limits*, and *Star Trek* hook a new generation on science fiction.
- 1966: Truffaut's film *Fahrenheit 451* opens, starring Oskar Werner and Julie Christie.

6. **1970s**

- 1971: *Apollo 15* crew names Dandelion Crater for Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*.
- 1977: Bradbury awarded lifetime World Fantasy Award.
- 1977: *Star Wars* opens, the last time anyone will think of science fiction as a cult genre.

7. **1980s**

- Bradbury receives PEN Center USA West Lifetime Achievement Award.
- William Gibson pioneers science-fiction subgenre cyberpunk.
- Fifteen more books from Bradbury, including horror collection *The Toybee Convector*.

8. **1990s**

- 1992: Bradbury writes his memoir *Green Shadows, White Whale* about scripting *Moby Dick*.
- Many science-fiction magazines shift to online format.
- 1999: Bradbury suffers a near-fatal stroke. He polishes his first mystery while still in the hospital.

9. **2000s**

- More honors: National Book Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, the National Medal of Arts, and a Pulitzer Prize—Special Citation.
- 2003: Bradbury's wife dies.
- 2005: Sam Weller's biography, *The Bradbury Chronicles*, appears.
- 2012: Ray Bradbury dies in Los Angeles on June 5, at age 91.

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 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."

OTHER FREQUENTLY CENSORED BOOKS

The Grapes of Wrath

Consistently ranked among the most often banned books in the American literary canon, John Steinbeck's 1937 novel has faced countless challenges from library systems and school districts. Among the most common complaints are its depictions of rural people as, to quote one petition, "low, ignorant, profane, and blasphemous."

To Kill a Mockingbird

The Committee on Intellectual Freedom at the American Library Association has listed Harper Lee's 1960 book as one of the ten most commonly challenged. Many school districts have banned it for its racial slurs and the occasional mild swear word.

A Farewell to Arms

Ernest Hemingway's third novel (1929) was a popular and critical success, though authorities in America and abroad disagreed. The book initially appeared as a five-part series in *Scribner's Magazine*, which Boston city officials banned as obscene. In Italy, it was deemed unpatriotic for its unflattering, and accurate, account of the Italian Army's retreat from Caporetto.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

The Concord Public Library in Massachusetts proscribed Mark Twain's enduring masterpiece as "trash suitable only for the slums" when it first came out in 1885. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People demanded its removal from New York City high schools in 1957 for a new reason: alleged racist content.

THEMES

Censorship
Knowledge versus Ignorance
Conformity versus Individuality
Distraction versus Happiness
Action versus Inaction
The Role of Institutions in Society—Religion, Government, Media

Deleted: ¶

DISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Theatre and Performance Studies
Literature
History
Media Studies
Communication Studies
Identity Studies
Anthropology and Sociology
Political Science
Criminal Justice
Public Administration

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Montag comes to learn that "firemen are rarely necessary" because "the public itself stopped reading of its own accord." Bradbury wrote his novel in 1953: To what extent has his prophecy come true today?
2. Clarisse describes a past that Montag has never known: one with front porches, gardens, and rocking chairs. What do these items have in common, and how might their removal have encouraged Montag's repressive society?
3. "Don't look to be saved in any one thing, person, machine, or library," Faber tells Montag. "Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore." How good is this advice?
4. One of the most significant of the many literary allusions in *Fahrenheit 451* occurs when Montag reads Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach." What is the response of Mildred's friends, and why does Montag kick them out of his house?
5. It may surprise the reader to learn that Beatty is quite well read. How can Beatty's knowledge of and hatred for books be reconciled?
6. Unlike Mrs. Hudson, Montag chooses not to die in his house with his books. Instead he burns them, asserting even that "it was good to burn" and that "fire was best for everything!" Are these choices and sentiments consistent with his character? Are you surprised that he fails to follow in her footsteps?
7. Beatty justifies the new role of firemen by claiming to be "custodians of [society's] peace of mind, the focus of [the] understandable and rightful dread of being inferior." What does he mean by this, and is there any sense that he might be right?
8. How does the destruction of books lead to more happiness and equality, according to Beatty? Does his lecture to Montag on the rights of man sound like any rhetoric still employed today?
9. Why does Montag memorize the Old Testament's Ecclesiastes and the New Testament's Revelation? How do the final two paragraphs of the novel allude to both biblical books?
10. Are there any circumstances where censorship might play a beneficial role in society? Are there some books that should be banned?
11. If you had to memorize a single book or risk its extinction, which book would you choose?