

Some Social and Cultural Context for Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

Garyn G. Roberts

Ray Bradbury lived in a golden age—a time that was uniquely rich in history and popular cultural advancement. From his earliest days of cognition, young Bradbury was able to effectively tie his personal experiences both with the cultural inheritance that his family provided him and with the burgeoning society around him. The result was that the young dreamer and author found and exploited a combined source of subject matters and atmospheres that framed his stories. In the process, he was able to connect with an extensive audience that could relate to what he felt and recorded in stories, plays, poems, and other art. There is so much to admire in the life, mindset, and creative art of Ray Bradbury, but if this were to be distilled into one explanation for his success, it would be that the author, from the start, brilliantly drew from his personal experience and cultural inheritance as the basis for his storytelling. By doing so, Bradbury was able to hit an incredible “responsive chord” in his vast international audience. His personal realism and romances alike were, and are, the stories of his audiences.

In the last couple of decades, the very best scholars of the life and work of Ray Bradbury have reviewed and scrutinized the personal and cultural contexts of the author’s life, and—using this method of inquiry—have endeavored to analyze evenhandedly what transpires in the creative work of the master. Nowhere is this form of analysis more appropriate and effective than in considering the social, cultural, and historical contexts that explain *Fahrenheit 451*.

Throughout his life, Ray Bradbury often claimed that he had very detailed, if not perfect, recall of the events of his life—even in uterus. While such claims are incredibly fantastic on the face of them, and perhaps not entirely humanly possible, there was some significant truth to this assertion. Bradbury proved time and again that he had extraordinary recall, and his art reflects at times memory large and small, personal and cultural.

Ray Bradbury was born to a lower middle-class family in Waukegan, IL. (Geographically, the town is located north of Chicago, on Lake Michigan, just south of the Wisconsin border. It is a very different, urbanized community today.) At the time, Waukegan, much like its fictional counterpart, “Green Town, Illinois,” was a frontier town in its waning days. The industrial revolution was catching up with Waukegan in the 1920s, and there was a massive paradigm shift—a big change. Much of this change is chronicled in Bradbury’s novel, *Dandelion Wine* (1957), wherein, among other things, a few Civil War veterans still linger in their twilight years, while trolley cars are replaced by buses and more modern forms of mass transit.

Change is not always good in the world of Ray Bradbury, or in the world of Guy Montag’s *Fahrenheit 451*. In both worlds, there is a very appealing call for romance, for how life used to be. Montag opines on several occasions throughout the novel that he needs to catch up with the memories of the past. And there is beauty in simplicity. In the not-so-distant-future world of Montag, old and abandoned railroad tracks are the last vestiges of, and fleeting connections back to, a frontier past. Now overgrown with plant life and strewn with rubble, these tracks remind of us of a time that was—or, perhaps, that never really was, but which we wanted it to be.

Perhaps the most insidious and threatening technological advance of Montag’s world is the Mechanical Hound, the invention that first terrorizes, then spies on, and finally hunts Montag, intent on his extermination. By its very nature, the Hound is devoid of human compassion and reason, for it is programmed by the firemen, the gatekeepers of morality, to seek out and destroy—much like the Daleks of *Dr. Who*. The mechanical dog in *Fahrenheit 451* is a perverse modernization of the old firehouse dog. Its menacing presence in the story, with its aggression and death-dealing poison, is highly effective as a vehicle that condemns future advances. It is technology that has gone wrong, like advanced forms of weaponry in the 1950s. Junior United States Senator Joseph McCarthy might very well have liked to have had this Mechanical Hound at his disposal during his administration.

Throughout his fictional yet highly autobiographical accounts of life in the 1920s, Ray Bradbury reminisces about his extended family that lived in an old Victorian-type house complete with ornate fringes, gingerbread, and cupolas. The Bradbury family came from Protestant theology, though the family and Ray found God in a vast array of places. Bradbury's childhood is a maze of nuclear and extended family members and friends. Residents and frequent visitors of the home included grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, siblings, and Mom and Dad. People rocked in rockers and swings on cool autumn evenings, and everyone knew everyone. All of this is antithetical to the world of Montag, wherein Bradbury uses his own personal experience and cultural inheritance as a counterpoint to the story.

As *Fahrenheit 451* unfolds, Guy Montag increasingly discovers the depths of his living nightmare. He has no extended family, and his own wife, Mildred, is a monster of banality: cold, unfeeling, and consciously and unconsciously blissfully uninformed. She is a spouse in name only and is not even a distant friend, much less sensual lover. In Montag's world, no one is allowed to walk outside under the stars, or swing on swings or rock on rockers. People stay indoors, in small, cold, barren structures. The only practiced religion is the religion of the State—a theology of ultimate compromise, cold stasis, and the lowest common denominator.

In his early years, Ray Bradbury discovered and embraced the popular culture of the day. At this time in the 1920s, young Ray had a treasured aunt named "Neva." In later years, Bradbury recounted on numerous occasions how important his Aunt Neva had been to him. It was she who introduced him to and nurtured his love for literature, silent film, newspaper comic strips, and much, much more. For young Ray, there were picnics by the water, adventures in the woods, extemporaneous plays and other imaginative exploits that seemed to come straight from the life of Tom Sawyer. There was opportunity seemingly everywhere, if one just looked for it.

By the late twenties and early thirties, Ray Bradbury was fully immersed in the worlds of L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz*. Today, in our semi-literate society, we remember the classic MGM Studios'

1939 motion picture, but the stories of Oz were chronicled in book form for 40 years before that movie, and Bradbury would speak fondly and often about this series for the remainder of his life. Those big oversized volumes with color covers, a plethora of interior black and white illustrations, elegant print font and page decorations, and the occasional color frontispiece were just short of the Holy Grail for Bradbury and children of all ages in the 1920s and '30s. Thick pulpwood pages carried tales of fictional and not-so-fictional worlds. There were adventure, romance, treasure, happiness, and newly-found friends in the Oz books. There were also perils, monsters, and outright evil. And, unashamedly, there was escape.

The world of *Fahrenheit 451* does not offer any real escape to Montag or his not-so-fictional counterparts...until the end. Montag is stuck until his epiphany of escape through books and people who embrace and even *are* books. Wicked witches and Gnome Kings and their ilk are not vanquished in Guy Montag's reality—at least not for a long time—as they are in the Oz tales.

A little more than ten years before Ray Bradbury's birth, Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950) introduced two archetypal adventure heroes. History would make the second of these heroes more famous—Tarzan of the Apes—but it was the first that had an even bigger impact on Bradbury: interplanetary explorer John Carter, who debuted in 1911 in the pulp magazine serial novel, *A Princess of Mars*. Burroughs' John Carter appeared in novels and novellas for the rest of Burroughs' life. Best described as Space Opera—Westerns in the sprawling frontier of the great cosmos, forerunners of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*—these adventures framed the imagination of young Bradbury. John Carter, in a not-so-distant future, fights totalitarian governments, despots, classicism and racism of various forms, and evil empires and entrepreneurs.

Some of the same historical and cultural realities of the early twentieth century define the near-future world of Guy Montag as well. Oppressive government and a class structure straight out the political theories of Karl Marx are central themes, and warnings, of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Ray Bradbury was a devotee of silent movies from his childhood on. While Edison and other international scientists had produced silent movies since the turn of the century, the height of the era of nitrate-based silent film arrived just about the time that Bradbury arrived on Earth. Adaptations of Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1925) defined Bradbury's early life. Then in the early days of sound motion pictures came *King Kong* (1933), with stop-motion animation by Willis O'Brien, who also had done the stop-motion animation for *The Lost World*, and then there came installments of Universal Studios' monster movie series based on Frankenstein's monster, Dracula, the Mummy, the Invisible Man, and others. Bradbury loved these movies; more importantly, he loved the literature of these movies.

Many of these movies featured monsters. Each was an abomination of nature, or of humanity's own meddling with nature. Later in the 1950s, Ray Bradbury would create stories and screenplays for movies. Each of Ray Bradbury's big-screen movies featured monsters, be they from outer space, from under the sea, and even the great white whale himself, Moby Dick. In its own way, *Fahrenheit 451* is very much a Ray Bradbury monster story. In this story, however, the monster takes a variety of forms and even some intangible forms. The monsters of *Fahrenheit 451* include the government, the book-burning firemen, the fire trucks with their mythic salamander iconography, the clamoring full-wall televisions, the Mechanical Hound, and the people themselves.

Also in the 1920s and '30s, Ray Bradbury was a card-carrying member of the public library. His Aunt Neva and extended family introduced him to newspaper comic strips, including *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon*. He lovingly cut the *Buck Rogers* strips out of discarded newspapers and pasted them in scrapbooks. In their way, members of the Bradbury family were pioneers of Popular Culture Studies. They embraced comic strips as closely as they held classic world literature. Young Bradbury was well read. He read international authors and playwrights (including Hugo, Dumas,

Scott, and Dostoyevsky), many American authors and local, regional authors as well. He figuratively devoured the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. He read and wrote poetry; in his own hand, he illustrated stories he had read; and he wrote sequels to some of his favorites. Jack Williamson, Henry Kuttner, Edmond Hamilton, and Leigh Brackett (champions and headliners of *Amazing Stories* and other pulp magazines) personally mentored Ray in his later teens and made him a writer. Bradbury often boasted that no other author, he thought, paid as much tribute in their work to other authors as he did. From the start, if one wanted to attack Ray Bradbury, that person attacked the books, and the people behind the books, that Bradbury loved. The enemy never won—and the enemy does not win in *Fahrenheit 451*.

As early as 1933, the Nazi party began burning books in Germany. The motivation was primarily anti-Semitism, but any books that were deemed “un-German” were targeted. Indeed, the list of some of our most revered authors singled out for literary execution is staggering—Helen Keller?! This very destructive period of Nazi Germany history is, sadly, although perhaps a little mercifully, not so well remembered today. Perhaps the most popular image of more recent times is the Nazi book burning scene in the motion picture *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), where a fictitious Hitler signs the Grail diary of Professor Jones, Sr. In real life, the level of purely destructive censorship involved in the Nazi book burning shook Ray Bradbury to the core. He was not alone. This tragic cultural history touched a very sensitive nerve in the readers of *Fahrenheit 451* in 1953 and years that followed. Bradbury’s classic novel brought back the horror of not only the book burning, not only the censorship, but the perversions and atrocities of Nazi Germany. Ray Bradbury’s audience, then as now, was and is emotionally tethered to the story line. We need to be; it should be no other way.

While books are the main mark for censorship in *Fahrenheit 451*, throughout his life Bradbury was quick to note that other forms of censorship are equally damning. He pointed out that victims of censorship could be not only those who employ print, but also those

who use non-print media such as painting, motion pictures, radio, television, and more to convey their messages. Politics, discourse, and education can be severely compromised, and even people killed as well. In his essays and articles, Bradbury often provided specific examples of these atrocities.

Like the later storm troopers of the *Star Wars* franchise, the firemen of *Fahrenheit 451* are goose-stepping reminders of a Hell not so long ago. Thankfully, Montag is introspective and evolves from his government-assigned occupation and life. But our hero's transition does not come easily. His struggles are not only central to the book—they are our struggles as individuals and members of society, too.

When World War II was officially over, the Cold War began. Suspicions and dissensions marked this multigenerational era of international politics. Axis powers were being humanely rebuilt and guided by some of the victorious Allies, but the Allies themselves were turning on each other. Impending apocalypse was averted for the moment, but the possibility was far from gone.

In fact, it was beginning again to gain momentum. Joseph McCarthy's "witch hunts" for Communists and communist sympathizers reached fever pitch. Ultimately, and thankfully, his own Republican Party eventually deflated him, though he had already disgraced himself long before.

The popular medium of comic books were the target of some well-meaning, if not often misguided do-gooders. Critics of the medium, who gained some traction with the "intellectual" and "moral" communities, included Dr. Frederic Wertham. Wertham, a famous expert on and defender of early twentieth-century serial killers, was the author of the infamous book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). This volume, presented from a psychological/sociological perspective, purported to analyze panels and images from selected comic books actually taken out of context, and claimed that the relatively new popular medium was the scourge of our youths' mental, emotional and intellectual health. (Ironically, toward the end of his life in the 1970s, Dr. Wertham spent considerable time in print recanting what he said and what he believed he had

been misrepresented saying.) Wertham's advocacy of wholesale censorship, which reached the halls of the United States Congress, is well remembered today.

In larger, urban markets, the late 1940s and early 1950s saw the advent of network television. This new audio-visual medium brought news, comedies, sporting events, and genre dramas—such as Westerns, detective fiction, suspense, and science fiction—to the living rooms of families that could afford what was then most assuredly a luxury. Television captivated people, much like computers and cellular telephones do today. Then, like now, the results were not all positive. Viewers considered television as the purveyor of unassailable truth—there was little critical assessment of the content and machinations of the new medium. And, like computers and cell phones today, television introduced a degree of unattractive antisocial behavior among its consumers.

The multi-walled television in the Montags' home is the most powerful and destructive narcotic in Mildred's life—and this, even considering the array of drugs the government of the novel allows and provides its citizens in an effort to stratify emotions, thinking, and behavior. The cartoon White Clown, master and monster of ceremonies of the television broadcasts, commands a cult status enviable to any radical evangelist or talk show host alive today. Mildred and her friends are transfixed by their interactive television family, and “reality” is prescribed by that same television family. Viewers descend to a level of non-social interaction that makes them no more than the “zombies” we fear in today's culture.

Throughout *Fahrenheit 451*, jet bombers fly overhead. These warplanes bring death and destruction, and they are the catalysts for the conflict at the story's end. When Guy Montag flees from the intellectually, emotionally, and technologically compromised city and escapes to the peace of the river and the countryside, he is pursued by the Mechanical Hound. When he catches up with Granger and the “human books,” he sees and hears the jets destroy the city. The real-life Cold War has arrived and become part of the inferno that is the world of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Two criticisms of Bradbury's work, including *Fahrenheit 451*, are that these stories use and misuse rather formulaic, even unimaginative, genres of "popular literature" and are flawed by illogically plotted story lines. Both assessments are inaccurate. *Fahrenheit 451* fits neatly into no generic category. It is neither wholly dystopian fiction nor utopian fare; the world does "go to Hell in a handbasket" around Montag, but he himself evolves and achieves self-worth and purpose, which previously he never had. Neither is this novel, strictly speaking, "science fiction," a popular genre whose definition varies greatly between practitioners, fans, and scholars of the form. Furthermore, *Fahrenheit 451* does not really even need to be genrefied. If we insist on labeling it, then terms and categories like "fantasy" and "speculative fiction" and "cultural critique" are most accurate because of their wide scope of parameters. Remember, too, that stories deemed "fantasy" and "fiction" should not be condemned as wholly unrealistic or fallacious. The fictions of any given social-historical-cultural period can tell us a great deal about peoples and societies and intellectual thought—sometimes as much as or more than so-called "nonfictions." Fiction, unlike nonfiction, does not have the pretext of being entirely real and accurate. Further, in the strictest sense of the term, there is no such thing as nonfiction, since all narratives are bound by biases, perceptions, perspectives, subjectivity, and human error.

Fahrenheit 451 is a good story that entertains and, in doing so, makes us think. The novel evokes personal experience and cultural inheritance. It is fair to say that Ray Bradbury never intended a purely logical, neatly packaged intellectual tract that was to be force-fed his readers. Rather, Bradbury produced a most disturbing and beautiful tale, which is full of errors in logic, that is sometimes unclear in its meaning, and which because of this, as much as any other novels of our times, reflects twentieth and early twenty-first century social and cultural history. Hence, it is replete with chaos, and only partial answers and explanations regarding our purposes as individuals and as members of larger national and world societies. *Fahrenheit 451* is the result of the keen observations and personal

experiences of its author; it is also a cultural artifact, which reflects who we were, who we are, and who we might become.

For 60 years, *Fahrenheit 451* has served as an entertaining yet serious warning—not of what has to be, but of what unfortunately increasingly is—and to an extent, we have listened. But we have heeded only some of the author’s words of prevention. Bradbury has forced us, at least at some level, to examine ourselves and our culture, and to analyze who we are and where we are going. This is the source of true power for the written narrative. But there is, too, an element of deadly accuracy in regard to Ray Bradbury’s vision. The video image and the sound bites, the texts and tweets of today are as skewed a reality, as much a pseudo-event of epic proportions, as any detailed and forewarned in *Fahrenheit 451*. Yet, as the novel continues to warn new generations of readers and thinkers, the echoes of Bradbury’s personal experiences of a now-vanished century, along with the cultural inheritance and the historical milieu that informed his art, continue to become part of *our* personal experience, *our* cultural inheritance, *our* historical milieu; in this, we are most fortunate indeed.