



Fahrenheit 451

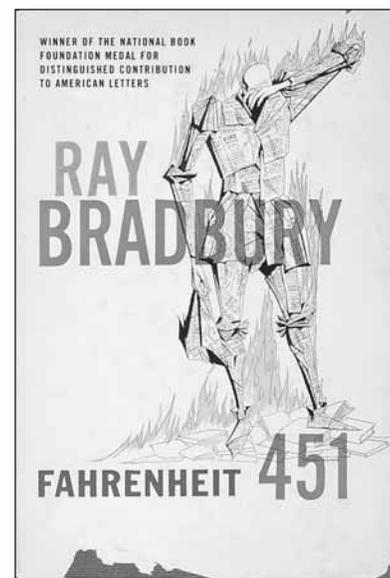
by Ray Bradbury

Winner of The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

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Reading Level: 7



• about the author •

When Mr. Electrico, a magician with a traveling show, came to Waukegan, Illinois during the 1920s, a twelve year-old boy was among the lucky youngsters selected for a special honor. Once Mr. Electrico tapped young Ray Bradbury on the shoulder with a sword and directed him to “live forever,” the boy “was changed forever. I will grow up, [he] thought, and become like him. I will be the greatest magician who ever walked the world.”

While the young Bradbury indeed spent time as an amateur magician in Waukegan, it was the magic of mastering the written word that ultimately captivated him, of capturing and, at the same time, freeing the words, spinning them into fantastic tales that entertain, perplex, frighten, stimulate thought, and inspire dreams.

How many stories has he written? Who’s counting? Enough to fill at least twenty published collections of his own stories. Enough to have contributed to more than seven hundred anthologies. Then there are the screenplays: among them “Moby Dick,” the 1956 film based on the Herman Melville classic; “Something Wicked This Way Comes,” a 1983 Disney film based on Bradbury’s 1962 book of the same name; his 1948 story “the Dark Ferris; “It Came from Outer Space”; and “The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms” from his story “The Foghorn.” There are teleplays for “Twilight Zone” and “Alfred Hitchcock Presents.” There are stage plays and poetry. And there are his novels: his first, “*Fahrenheit 451*” (brought to the screen by Francois Truffaut in 1966) and “*The Martian Chronicles*” (a 1980 NBC- TV mini-series).

How much has he written? Take a clue from his words: “I’m accustomed, you see, to getting up every morning, running to the typewriter, and in an hour I’ve created a world.” And from this, his advice to aspiring young writers: to start disciplining themselves early in their careers, he says, they should put down “one or two thousand words everyday for the next twenty years.”

He has garnered many awards for his writings, including one from the National Institute of Arts and Letters for *Fahrenheit 451*, an Academy Award nomination for a 1963 short film, “Icarus Montgolfier Wright,” and a World Fantasy Award for life achievement.



• about the book

A novel of the future in which censorship has gone wild. Acclaimed as a modern classic in the tradition of *Brave New World* and *1984*, this novel predicts a chilling but believable future.

Fahrenheit 451, the 1953 reincarnation of “The Fire Man,” presents ideas that are far more complex than that brief description indicates. This novel is an ominous, warning of a future populated by non-readers and non-thinkers; a lost people with no sense of their history. At the same time it salutes those who dedicate their lives to the preservation and passing on of knowledge, and testifies to the quiet or passionate courage of the rebel with a cause. *Fahrenheit 451* also poses questions about the role(s) of government: Should it reflect the will of the people? Should government do the people’s thinking for them?

• plot summary

There is power in the fire hose, the power to sweep the legs out from under history and bring it crashing down. The power to change things. This power is the one certainty in the life Guy Montag, a thirty-year-old fireman, and wielding it thrills him. Then he meets Clarisse McClellan, his new neighbor, almost seventeen, and different, and their meeting changes him.

Their first conversation is strange, especially in light of the fact that although he is the elder of the two it is she who brings up all sorts of recollections of the past, when firemen used to put fires out, when billboards were only twenty feet long and not two hundred (they were lengthened, she says, because the cars whizzed by too swiftly for drivers to read the shorter signs). Clarisse asks startling questions, too: “Do you ever read any of the books you burn?”—a notion which Montag laughingly dismisses. “Are you happy?” He ponders this one long after they part.

After this puzzling yet refreshing encounter, Montag discovers his wife, Mildred, lying unconscious in their bedroom, having swallowed a deadly dose of sleeping pills. He summons medical help immediately and soon, thanks to two snake-like machines that suction out the poisons and pump in fresh blood, she is restored.

The next morning, Mildred is vibrant. Oblivious to the previous night’s events, she becomes engrossed in the broadcasts beamed onto the larger-than-life TV walls in their living room. Now Montag is the depressed one; he goes out for a walk and again he meets Clarisse. This time she is out savoring the rainfall, and when she dashes off to a psychiatric appointment (school officials consider her pensiveness, curiosity, and nonconformist behavior abnormal), Montag tilts his head back and tastes the rain himself. This from a man who only one day before could not remember the last time he’d noticed the dew on the grass or the man in the moon.

At work that night Montag is menaced, though not attacked, by the Mechanical Hound. An amalgam of police dog, spider, and computer, the Hound has one function, to track down enemies of the state (people who read books, for example) and render them helpless with sleep-inducing drugs. Montag’s boss, Captain Beatty, makes light of the incident when Montag reports it, teasing the fireman about having something to hide. Montag wonders if Beatty suspects the stash of books he has pilfered during house raids.

Every day for a week Clarisse walks Montag to the subway, always surprising him with little gifts from nature or with stories about her life, about life in general, about the past. She tells him that she is considered anti-social because of her distaste for racing around in cars, sports, watching classroom lectures on TV (no live teachers), and violence. She speaks of the days her uncle has told her about, when children did not kill each other and when pictures were not all abstract, but sometimes “said things and even showed people.” At the end of this week, though, Clarisse suddenly disappears. The Hound threatens Montag more boldly than ever. And a particularly distressing fire call claws at Montag’s conscience: a woman, betrayed by a neighbor, sets herself aflame, along with her books and her house, before the awestruck firemen have a chance to light the kerosene— but not before Montag snatches up another book for his forbidden collection.

• plot summary (continued)

Shaken by these events and by Mildred's news of Clarisse's possibly fatal accident (Mildred isn't sure whether the girl actually died, but her family has moved away), Montag feels too sickened to face another day at the firehouse. Like a truant officer, Captain Beatty comes to call at Montag's bedside, apprising him of the true history of book burning—which, according to Beatty, began without the lighting of a single flame but instead with the advent of mass communications; the masses, says Beatty, wanted all information boiled down to a “paste-pudding norm,” to “snap endings”—like those provided by the TV parlor shows that fascinated Mildred but disgust Montag, who finds them meaningless.

As Beatty speaks, Mildred discovers a book hidden behind her husband's pillow. Beatty, who doesn't actually see the book, nevertheless assures Montag that curious firemen have swiped books before and that if such a fireman turns the book in within twenty-four hours, there is no harm done.

After Beatty's departure, Montag reveals his cache of books to Mildred. He pleads with her to sift through the books with him for any bits of enlightenment that can save the couple from the desolate future gaping before them—an ever-growing estrangement between them; a community rife with suicide and violence; a world at war constantly, perhaps endlessly.

Not being able to make sense of the books, Montag visits a retired English professor, Faber, whom he had met in a park the year before. (At that time, although sure Faber was concealing a book, Montag had not reported him; instead he talked to him and listened to poetry.) Using a rare book, the Bible, as bait, Montag coaxes Faber into become his ally. Faber gives him a tiny transmitting device for secret long distance communication; through this Faber will be able to advise Montag on-the-spot during his next meeting with Captain Beatty.

Back at home, enraged by the alternatively trivial and callous dinnertime conversation of Mildred's visiting friends and by their obsession with the TV parlor, Montag recklessly whips out a book of poetry and reads to them. The distraught women (including his own wife) report him to the authorities and Beatty forces Montag to set fire to his own house. But when the transmitter drops out of Montag's ear in front of Beatty, exposing Faber to possible discovery, Montag turns the flame thrower onto Beatty and then the Mechanical Hound.

Now a fugitive from the law he once gleefully enforced, Montag races to Faber's house and with the professor's assistance evades a second Hound and escapes to the river. Soon he joins a band of hobos who turn out to be walking, talking “books”—they've memorized the words, storing them for the times and places where people will be willing to listen.

This is a time of endings and new beginnings, for Montag and for the world as he knows it: a massive bombardment levels the city he has just fled. Perhaps his newly acquired knowledge—the Book of Ecclesiastes—will be a valued commodity in the new world that rises from the ashes.

• discussion & comprehension

1. Why would society make “being a pedestrian” a crime? (Clarisse tells Montag that her uncle was once arrested for this.)
2. One suicide and one near-suicide occur in this book. One woman, who shuns books but loves TV and driving fast in her car, anesthetizes herself; “We get these cases nine or ten a night,” says the medical technician. Another woman, who cherishes her books, sets herself on fire with them; “These fanatics always try suicide,” says the fire captain. Why would two people who seem to be so different from each other try to take their own lives? Why does suicide happen so frequently in Montag’s society?
3. Captain Beatty quotes history, scripture, poetry, philosophy. He is obviously a well-read man. Why hasn’t he been punished? And why does he view the books he’s read with such contempt?
4. Beatty tells Montag that firemen are “custodians of peace of mind” and that they stand against “those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought.” How well are the firemen accomplishing these objectives? Are conflicting ideas the only source of unhappiness in their society? What other sources might there be? Can conflicting ideas exist even without books that have been destroyed and outlawed?
5. Why do you think the firemen’s rulebook credited Benjamin Franklin—writer, publisher, political leader, inventor, ambassador—as being the first fireman?
6. Why does Beatty program the Hound to track Montag even before Montag stole the book? Do you believe Beatty had seen him steal books before? Or is it that Beatty had detected a change in Montag’s attitude or behavior? Cite incidents in the book that support your answer.
7. Montag turns to books to rescue him; instead they help demolish his life—he loses his wife, job and home; he kills a man and is forced to be a nomad. Does he gain any benefits from books? If so, what are they?
8. Do you believe, as Montag did, that Beatty wanted to die? If so, why do you think so?
9. Since the government is so opposed to readers, thinkers, walkers, and slow drivers, why does it allow the procession of men along the railroad tracks to exist?
10. Once Montag becomes a violent revolutionary, why does the government purposely capture an innocent man in his place instead of tracking down the real Montag? Might the government believe that Montag is no longer a threat?
11. Granger, spokesperson for the group on the railroad tracks, tells Montag, “Right now we have a horrible job; we’re waiting for the war to begin and, as quickly, end...When the war’s over, perhaps we can be of some use in the world.” Based on what you’ve read of the world these men live in, do you believe that the books they carry inside themselves will make a difference? Might this difference be positive or negative? Point out episodes in *Fahrenheit* to support your response.
12. What does Granger mean when he says, “We’re going to go build a mirror factory first and put out nothing but mirrors for the next year and take a long time to look at them?” Why would “mirrors” be important in this new society? (Note: In Part 1, Clarisse is said to be “like a mirror.”)
13. Although Ray Bradbury’s work is often referred to as science fiction, *Fahrenheit* has plenty to say about the world as it is, and not as it could be. As you review the book, list examples of the themes mentioned below, as well as others you notice. Discuss how you feel about the stands the author or characters take in *Fahrenheit*.
 - conformity vs. individuality
 - freedom of speech and the consequences of losing it
 - the importance of remembering and understanding history
 - machines as helpers to humans, machines as hindrances or enemies

• composition

1. Although Montag appears to be satisfied with his work when the book opens, later information reveals that he does not always follow the stationhouse policy to the letter. It also suggests that, perhaps even before meeting Clarisse, Montag is less than ecstatic about his work and home life. As you review “The Hearth and the Salamander” and “The Sieve and the Sand,” seek out and discuss examples of Montag’s thoughts and actions that support this view of him as a disenchanting man.
2. Why do you think Montag stole his first book? Do you think it was an automatic action done entirely by his hand “with a brain of its own” as the author describes Montag’s theft on page 37? Why did he continue to take and hide books despite the disastrous consequences?
3. What will Montag do after the war? Will he stay with his new friends, “the books,” traveling and sharing his message from Ecclesiastes with whomever will listen? Will he break off with them to search for Clarisse and/or Mildred? Will he try to keep his appointment with Professor Faber in St. Louis? And if those two do meet, will they carry out their plot involving the retired printer and planting books in firemen’s homes? Imagine the course of action you hope that Montag will take and write your own epilogue to the novel.

• suggested activities

Censorship watch: Who says “it can’t happen here”? Scan current newspapers and magazines over a period of time for evidence that censorship of books and information goes on even today. Keep notes and report on your findings. Or, cut out or make copies of the articles you’ve found and develop a bulletin board or scrapbook of these materials with your classmates, to be discussed in class periodically.

• beyond the book

A Note on Censorship:

“Whether or not my ideas on censorship via the fire department will be old hat by this time next week, I dare not predict. When the wind is right, a faint odor of kerosene is exhaled from Senator McCarthy.”

—Ray Bradbury, 1953

Firemen paid to start fires may have been a Bradbury idea but he did not have to invent book burning. Censorship was a real and frightening concern in the U.S. when *Fahrenheit 451* came out in 1953 during the height of the career of Joseph McCarthy, the U.S. Senator from Wisconsin whose unfounded accusations of a Communist-infiltrated Department of State led to the suppression of information and the propagation of falsehoods and fear—effects not unlike those the firemen of *Fahrenheit* had on citizens in their state.

Fallout from the McCarthy cloud spread beyond government boundaries into the private sector as well. The pressure to scrutinize, modify, and prohibit was on, and writers, publishers, moviemakers, performers and advertisers felt the squeeze. In 1953, the Chicago Archdiocese Council of Catholic Men was spearheading a pro-censorship campaign; the city government in St. Cloud, Minnesota, was adding new names each month to its list of three hundred banned books. This alarming trend prompted President Dwight D. Eisenhower to speak out:

“Don’t join the book burners,” he cautioned graduating seniors at Dartmouth College. “Don’t think you’re going to conceal faults by concealing evidence that they ever existed. Don’t be afraid to go into your library and read every book...” “Freedom cannot be censored into existence,” he wrote to the American Library Association. “A democracy chronically fearful of new ideas would be a dying democracy.”

Despite the President’s words and the freedom of press and expression written into our Constitution, censorship thrives in the U.S. today. In 1983, a major publisher canceled the printing or shipping of two novels and a book of verse whose authors did not comply with suggestions to “soften” the language and replace two of the poems. In 1984, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck was banned in Scottsboro, Alabama, high schools because of “profanity,” and a group of parents and students in Church Hill, Tennessee, went to court to fight against use of “anti-Christian,” “anti-American” English textbooks approved by the state. For ten years up until April 1984, publishers who wanted their textbooks bought in Texas had to leave out any mention of evolution unless it was labeled theory rather than fact and called, “one of several explanations of the origins of mankind.”

Your students may be especially interested in investigating and debating school newspaper and textbook censorship, issues which affect them most directly.

Bradbury’s own 1973 “Author’s Afterword” in *Fahrenheit 451* (pp. 167-173) is a spirited, provocative commentary on censorship from a writer’s point of view, prompting such questions as: Where should one draw the line between “editing” and “censorship”? Is all censorship harmful? Who is best qualified to judge what is right for other people to read? What are alternatives to book burning when individuals and groups are displeased with what they read?

• about this guide

Teacher’s Guide by Alice Jones-Miller. Ms. Jones-Miller is an editor and writer living in Westchester County, New York.

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