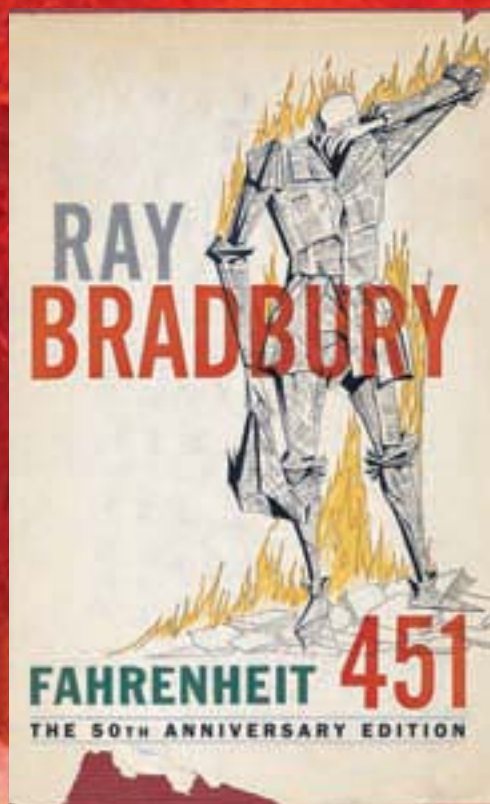


“There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running around with lit matches.”

—Ray Bradbury



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## **FAHRENHEIT 451—55 YEARS LATER**

An Interview with Ray Bradbury and Chris Schluep, Ballantine Senior Editor

**Pasadena, Aug. 1, 2008** “Fifty-five years later, and the book is doing so well—it’s terrific.” Ray Bradbury ebulliently proclaimed over the phone from his home in Pasadena. “Just a few months ago, *Fahrenheit-451* was translated into Egyptian. **Egyptian** for God’s sake. Now it’s in the Alexandria Library, and it’s a part of world history. Alexandria was the first place where books were burned, after all. The library there burnt three or four times; Caesar even caused it be set fire once.”



CHRIS SCHLUEP: But I needed to know: just where did the idea for his classic book come from? He instantly recalled that for me...

RAY BRADBURY: When I was writing *Fahrenheit-451* on a rented typewriter, I was doing so in the basement of another library—at UCLA. Many people think I was reacting to the McCarthy era, which was going on at the time, but the truth is I wasn’t thinking about McCarthy so much as I was thinking about the burning of the library of Alexandria 5,000 years before. Then I would walk through the stacks at UCLA, look at all those books, and think about more recent events in Italy and Germany, and the rumors about Russia during the war. What could endanger all those books? That’s what I was thinking as I wrote my book.

CS: And this, I guess, is what prompted the writing of the classic. But what about the fifty-five years since? How is the book being read and interpreted today? Mr. Bradbury was happy to let me know.

RB: Two plays just opened up based on *Fahrenheit-451*, one in New York and one in Pasadena. Egypt is teaching the book through an international component of the NEA’s Big Read program. Here in America, *Fahrenheit-451* is part of The Big Read program, too.

CS: Wow, and it all started in the basement of the UCLA library. What about librarians? Teachers? What message does he have for them today?

RB: In particular, I’m very proud of the work of teachers and librarians. The book is being taught by teachers in thousands of schools across America. And it’s being celebrated by librarians in libraries, too. I owe teachers and librarians a huge debt of gratitude, and I couldn’t be happier or more proud of the work they’re doing and how they’ve received my books.

CS: With that, I thanked him for his time and allowed him to go back to what he was doing before I called—writing on a typewriter, this one he owned.

The following essay was written by Ray Bradbury in response to feedback to his classic work *Fahrenheit 451*. It captures his thoughts on the subject of censorship of his book and other great works of literature. It is included in the Ballantine paperback edition of this book.

### **Coda** by Ray Bradbury

About two years ago, a letter arrived from a solemn young Vassar lady telling me how much she enjoyed reading my experiment in space mythology, *The Martian Chronicles*.

But, she added, wouldn’t it be a good idea, this late in time, to rewrite the book inserting more women’s characters and roles?

A few years before that I got a certain amount of mail concerning the same Martian book complaining that the blacks in the book were Uncle Toms and why didn’t I “do them over”?

Along about then came a note from a southern white, suggesting that I was prejudiced in favor of the blacks and the entire story should be dropped.

Two weeks ago my mountain of mail delivered forth a pipsqueak mouse of a letter from a well-known publishing house that wanted to reprint my story “The Fog Horn” in a high school reader.

In my story, I had described a lighthouse as having, late at night, an illumination coming from it that was a “God-Light.” Looking up at it from the viewpoint of any sea-creature one would have felt that one was in “the Presence.”

The editors had deleted “God-Light” and “in the Presence.”

Some five years back, the editors of yet another anthology for school readers put together a volume with some 400 (count ’em) short stories in it. How do you cram 400 short stories by Twain, Irving, Poe, Maupassant and Bierce into one book?

Simplicity itself. Skin, debone, demarrow, scarify, melt,

render down and destroy. Every adjective that counted, every verb that moved, every metaphor that weighed more than a mosquito—out! Every simile that would have made a sub-moron's mouth twitch—gone! Any aside that explained the two-bit philosophy of a first-rate writer—lost!

Every story, slenderized, starved, bluepenciled, leeches and bled white, resembled every other story. Twain read like Poe read like Shakespeare read like Dostoevsky read like—in the finale—Edgar Guest. Every word of more than three syllables had been razored. Every image that demanded so much as one instant's attention—shot dead.

Do you begin to get the damned incredible picture?

How did I react to all of the above?

By "firing" the whole lot.

By sending rejection slips to each and every one.

By ticketing the assembly of idiots to the far reaches of hell.

The point is obvious. There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running around with lit matches. Every minority, be it Baptist/Unitarian, Irish/Italian/Octogenarian/Zen Buddhist, Zionist/Seventh-day Adventist, Women's Lib/Republican, Mattachine/Four-Square Gospel feels it has the will, the right, the duty to douse the kerosene, light the fuse. Every dimwit editor who sees himself as the source of all dreary blancmange plain porridge unleavened literature, licks his guillotine and eyes the neck of any author who dares to speak above a whisper or write above a nursery rhyme.

Fire-Captain Beatty, in my novel *Fahrenheit 451*, described how the books were burned first by minorities, each ripping a page or a paragraph from this book, then that, until the day came when the books were empty and the minds shut and the libraries closed forever.

"Shut the door, they're coming through the window, shut the window, they're coming through the door," are the words to an old song. They fit my lifestyle with newly arriving butcher/censors every month. Only six weeks ago, I discovered that, over the years, some cubby-hole editors at Ballantine Books, fearful of contaminating the young, had, bit by bit censored some 75 separate sections from the novel. Students, reading the novel which, after all, deals with censorship and book-burning in the future, wrote to tell me of this exquisite irony. Judy-Lynn Del Rey, one of the new Ballantine editors, is having the entire book reset and republished this summer with all the damns and hells back in place.

A final test for old Job II here: I sent a play, *Leviathan 99*, off to a university theater a month ago. My play is based on the "Moby Dick" mythology, dedicated to Melville, and concerns a rocket crew and a blind space captain who ven-

ture forth to encounter a Great White Comet and destroy the destroyer. My drama premieres as an opera in Paris this autumn. But, for now, the university wrote back that they hardly dared do my play—it had no women in it! And the ERA ladies on campus would descend with ball-bats if the drama department even tried!

Grinding my bicuspid into powder, I suggested that would mean, from now on, no more productions of *Boys in the Band* (no women), or *The Women* (no men). Or, counting heads, male and female, a good lot of Shakespeare that would never be seen again especially if you count lines and find that all the good stuff went to the males!

I wrote back maybe they should do my play one week, and *The Women* the next. They probably thought I was joking, and I'm not sure that I wasn't.

For it is a mad world and it will get madder if we allow the minorities, be they dwarf or giant, orangutan or dolphin, nuclear-head or water-conversationalist, pro-computerologist or Neo-Luddite, simpleton or sage, to interfere with aesthetics. The real world is the playing ground for each and every group, to make or unmake laws. But the tip of the nose of my book or stories or poems is where their rights end and my territorial imperatives begin, run and rule. If Mormons do not like my plays, let them write their own. If the Irish hate my Dublin stories, let them rent typewriters. If teachers and grammar school editors find my jawbreaker sentences shatter their mushmilk teeth, let them eat stale cake dunked in weak tea of their own ungodly manufacture. If the Chicano intellectuals wish to re-cut my "Wonderful Ice Cream Suit" so it shapes "Zoot," may the belt unravel and the pants fall.

For, let's face it, digression is the soul of wit. Take philosophic asides away from Dante, Milton or Hamlet's father's ghost and what stays is dry bones. Laurence Sterne said it once: Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine, the life, the soul of reading! Take them out and one cold eternal winter would reign in every page. Restore them to the writer—he steps forth like a bridegroom, bids them all-hail, brings in variety and forbids the appetite to fail.

In sum, 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.

All you umpires, back to the bleachers. Referees, hit the showers. It's my game. I pitch, I hit, I catch. I run the bases. At sunset I've won or lost. At sunrise I'm out again, giving it the old try.

And no one can help me. Not even you. ■

### About the Writer

RAY BRADBURY is America's foremost writer of science fiction and fantasy. Among his most popular adult books are *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*, and *Dandelion Wine*. In addition, he has written several books for children, including *Switch On The Night*.