



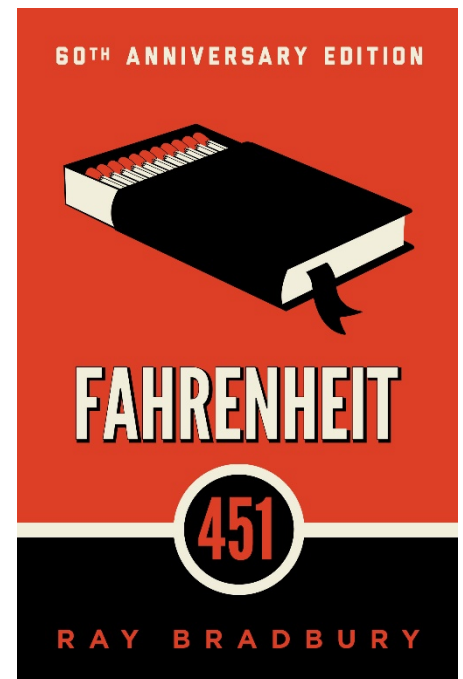
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Fahrenheit 451

by Ray Bradbury

Called, “the book for our social media age” by the *New York Times*, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* is a gripping story that is 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. *Fahrenheit 451* is a “masterpiece ... everyone should read” (*The Boston Globe*). “Brilliant ... startling and ingenious. Mr. Bradbury’s account of this insane world, which bears many alarming resemblances to our own, is fascinating” (*The New York Times*). Bradbury is “one of this country’s most beloved writers” (*The Washington Post*).



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

For more information about the NEA Big Read, visit www.arts.gov/partnerships/nea-big-read

For information about the NEA, visit www.arts.gov

For information about Arts Midwest, visit www.artsmidwest.org

About the Book

“There must be something in books, something we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house.” – from *Fahrenheit 451*

The three main sections of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* all end in fire. The novel focuses on Guy Montag, a fireman who, in the first section, we discover is a professional book burner, expected to start fires instead of putting them out.

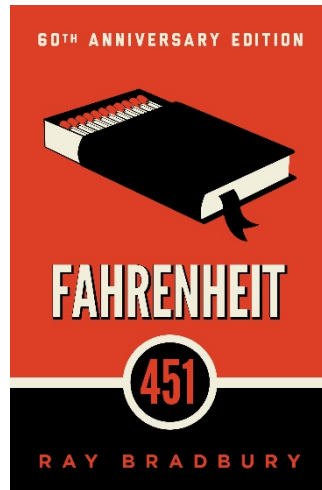
For years he has done his job obediently and well, and finds a “special pleasure” in burning books (p.1). Then one day, he is called upon to burn the books of a Mrs. Hudson, who prefers to die rather than leave her library. Furtively, Montag pockets some of her books, haunted by the idea that a life 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 without books 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.

“Our civilization is flinging itself to pieces. Stand back from the centrifuge.” – from *Fahrenheit 451*

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.

Literary Allusions in *Fahrenheit 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*.

About the Author

Ray Bradbury (1920-2012)

"I have never listened to anyone who criticized my taste in space travel, sideshows or gorillas. When this occurs, I pack up my dinosaurs and leave the room." – Ray Bradbury in *Zen in the Art of Writing*

Ray Douglas Bradbury was born in

Waukegan, Illinois, into a family that once included a

17th-century Salem woman tried for witchcraft. In 1934, the Bradbury family drove across the country in their jalopy to Los Angeles, and young Ray found the local library at every stop, searching for 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," a weekly Thursday-night conclave he joined that would grow to attract such science-fiction legends as Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and Leigh Brackett.

"The Bradbury family drove across the country in their jalopy to Los Angeles, and young Ray found the local library at every stop."

After a rejection notice from the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, Bradbury sent his short story "Homecoming" to



Photo by Tom Victor

Mademoiselle, where 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. That same year, Bradbury began his long marriage to Marguerite McClure, whom he met the previous April while she was working at Fowler Brothers Bookstore. According to McClure, she had him pegged for a shoplifter. "Once I figured out that he wasn't stealing books, that was it. I fell for him."

"As always in his writing, technology takes a backseat to the human stories."

Bradbury's books of short stories include *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), *The Illustrated Man* (1951), and *I Sing the Body Electric* (1969). As always in his writing, technology takes a backseat to the human stories. He wrote his first novel, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), 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 they love and love what they do, which he practiced himself until his death at age 91.

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: Do you think his prophecy—in any way—came true? How so?
2. Clarisse describes a past that Montag has never known: one with front porches, gardens, and rocking chairs. What do you think these items evoke? How might their absence 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." What do you think Faber means by this? Do you agree with his 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." Why do you think Bradbury chose this poem? How do Mildred's friends respond to the poem, and why does Montag kick them out of his house?
5. Were you surprised to learn that Beatty is quite well read? What do you think lead Beatty to despise books? How do you think his knowledge of and hatred for books can be reconciled? What do you think he means when he says "a book is a loaded gun in the house next door"?
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? Were you surprised that he failed to follow in her footsteps? Why do you think he chose not to?
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 do you think he means by this?
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 in which censorship might play a beneficial role in society? Can you think of any books that you might argue should be banned? Why or why not?
11. If you had to memorize a single book or risk its extinction, which book would you choose?



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.

Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



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