

☉ Ray Bradbury

BORN: 1920, Waukegan, Illinois

NATIONALITY: American

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

The Martian Chronicles (1950)

The Illustrated Man (1951)

Fahrenheit 451 (1953)

Dandelion Wine (1957)

Something Wicked This Way Comes (1962)

Overview

An important figure in the development of science fiction, Ray Bradbury was among the first authors to combine the concepts of science fiction with a sophisticated

prose style. In a career that has spanned more than forty years, Bradbury has written fantasies, crime and mystery stories, supernatural tales, and mainstream literature as well as science fiction.

Works in Biographical and Historical Context

Childhood Fears Make Lasting Impression Bradbury was born on August 22, 1920, and spent most of his childhood in Waukegan, Illinois, a small community on the western shore of Lake Michigan, which was to become the “Green Town” of many later stories. Early in life Bradbury was introduced to the world of fantasy and the supernatural. Many Bradbury stories, including several in his collection *Dark Carnival* (1947), can be traced back to specific events in his childhood. Even his earliest memories would later become raw material for his



Ray Bradbury Bradbury, Ray, photograph. The Library of Congress.

fiction. By the time he was six, he had seen several horror movies, notably *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) and Lon Chaney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), and had developed a morbid fear of the dark. His 1955 children's book, *Switch on the Night*, was based on these memories and designed to allay the fear of darkness for his own children.

His Aunt Neva, whose name was given to a character in a few stories and who received the dedication of the 1953 collection *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, introduced him to fairy tales and to the Oz books of L. Frank Baum, whom Bradbury later counted among his chief influences. Bradbury's father, Leonard Spaulding Bradbury, worked as a lineman for the Waukegan Bureau of Power and Light. Not only did "Leonard Spaulding" later become a Bradbury pseudonym, but even his father's mundane occupation was transformed into romance in the 1948 story "Powerhouse."

Twice during his childhood, in 1926–1927 and again in 1932–1933, Bradbury lived with his family in Arizona, where his father hoped to find work after being laid off during the Great Depression. It is possible that these early impressions of the desert affected his later visions of Mars and perhaps his sensitive views of Mexican Americans as well. But both moves were abortive, and in both cases the family returned to Waukegan. The Bradburys did not move west permanently until their 1934 move to Los Angeles. Bradbury dates his career choice from about this time: at the age of fifteen, he began submitting short stories to major national magazines, hoping ultimately for a sale to the *Saturday Evening Post* but receiving no acceptance. Encouraged by sympathetic high school literature teachers, however, he became active in his school's drama classes and wrote for school publications.

In 1937 Bradbury's first real connection with the world of science fiction began when he joined the Los Angeles Science Fiction League. Here, he met Henry Kuttner, a budding professional writer whose first story was published that same year and who would become something of a mentor to the younger writer. The league's fazine, *Imagination!*, printed Bradbury's first published short story, "Hollerbochen's Dilemma," in 1938. His increasing involvement as a science-fiction fan led him, in 1939, to begin his own mimeographed publication, *Futura Fantasia*. That same year he attended the World Science Fiction convention in New York and visited the New York World's Fair.

Writing for Pulp Magazines At the age of twenty, Bradbury was still living with his family and selling newspapers for income, but by this time a career as a writer seemed a real possibility. He began his career during the 1940s as a writer for such pulp magazines as *Black Mask*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Weird Tales*. The last-named magazine served to showcase the works of such fantasy writers as H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and

August Derleth. Derleth, who founded Arkham House, a publishing company specializing in fantasy literature, accepted one of Bradbury's stories for *Who Knocks?* an anthology published by his firm.

By 1944 Bradbury, exempt from the World War II draft because of his poor vision, seemed aware that style was his strong point and he became more conscious of developing it. His career clearly on the upswing, Bradbury was so confident of his own future output that on the eve of his wedding to Marguerite McClure in 1947, he claims, he burned more than a million words of his earlier writing that he felt did not meet his current standards.

An Established Reputation Bradbury's career seemed to be moving rapidly in several directions at once. His first book, *Dark Carnival*, published by Arkham House in 1947, would bolster his reputation as a writer of weird fiction, but that was a kind of fiction that Bradbury was coming to write less and less frequently. From *Weird Tales* he had moved into publishing in *American Mercury*, *Mademoiselle*, *Charm*, *Harper's*, and the *New Yorker*, and his fiction was beginning to appear with some regularity in such mainstream collections as *The Best American Short Stories* and *Prize Stories: O. Henry Awards*.

The publication of *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) established Bradbury's reputation as an author of sophisticated science fiction, though he himself contended that the work was fantasy, since his vision of Mars was not intended to be plausible or realistic. Another significant collection of short stories, *The Illustrated Man* (1951), appeared the following year. Even though many of his stories were fantasy and science fiction, Bradbury was gaining a reputation as a sensitive stylist who tackled the contemporary social issues of racism and illegal immigration of Mexicans.

In 1953 Bradbury published his first novel, *Fahrenheit 451*. This book had been germinating as early as 1947 when Bradbury wrote a short story, "Bright Phoenix," about a small town whose residents foil government book burnings by each memorizing one of the censored texts. In 1951 this basic premise involving government book burners was expanded to novella length as "The Fireman," which appeared in the February issue of *Galaxy*. Bradbury doubled "The Fireman" to become *Fahrenheit 451*.

Although *Fahrenheit 451* can be viewed as a passionate attack on censorship and the McCarthyism of the early 1950s, which Bradbury and others had likened to Nazi oppression and book burning, the novel can also be seen as an attack on the growing power of 1950s mass culture, particularly television, whose dynamics disallow complexity of thought and that consistently falls prey to the demands of special interest groups. Above all, the book-burning firemen of the novel are concerned that culture be made inoffensive, unthreatening, and universally accessible, all of which were concerns about the effects of television expressed by early critics of that new medium.

Focusing on Drama By the mid 1960s, Bradbury was devoting much of his time to drama. *The World of Ray Bradbury* opened on the stages in Los Angeles in 1964 and in New York in 1965, and *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit* opened as a musical in 1965. During the 1970s, Bradbury continued to concentrate on drama and poetry, producing relatively little new fiction. His 1976 collection *Long after Midnight* drew heavily on his earlier stories. Its chief value may lie in the focus it places on a kind of Bradbury story that had long been characteristic but infrequently collected: the story that depicts an epiphanic discovery of love between two people.

Though Bradbury has written little science fiction for the past four decades, his is still the name that most often comes to mind when the genre is mentioned among non-aficionado readers, and he is one of a handful of writers anywhere who can command huge printings and sales for a volume of short stories.

Works in Literary Context

Often described as economical yet poetic, Bradbury's fiction conveys a vivid sense of place in which everyday events are transformed into unusual, sometimes sinister situations. In all of his work, he emphasizes basic human values and cautions against unthinking acceptance of technological progress. His persistent optimism, evident even in his darkest work, has led some critics to label him sentimental or naive. Bradbury, however, perceives life, even at its most mundane, with a childlike wonder and awe that charges his work with a fervent affirmation of humanity.

Mirroring American Life Although labeled a science-fiction writer, Bradbury has also written many realistic tales, including sympathetic stories about Mexicans, Irishmen, and Chicanos. Though his subject matter is diverse, a native regionalism characterizes his work. Bradbury's Mars bears a similarity to the American Midwest, and behind Los Angeles and Dublin and all towns on Bradbury's map lies the archetypal village: "Green Town, Illinois." Bradbury shows affinities, in lighter moments, with Steinbeck's comedies of folk tenacity and in his darker moods (and these are more numerous), with the Anderson of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Scratch the surface in Bradbury and eminently native patterns emerge. The real Bradbury is a portraitist, less the chronicler of Mars than of twisted, small-town American lives.

Bradbury was often criticized for this trait by science-fiction readers, but he has repeatedly maintained that his Mars is not a projection of the future but rather a mirror of American life. Indeed the subject matter of that book is more history than science, and what technology the book features is largely technology in the service of exploring new frontiers. Bradbury does not dwell on making his machines believable any more than he dwells on making his Mars astronomically accurate; his real concerns appeared to be conducting an exploration of

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Bradbury's famous contemporaries include:

Arthur C. Clarke (1917–1992): Clarke was a British author and inventor who is best known for his best-selling science-fiction novel and its film version *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

Anthony Burgess (1917–1993): Burgess was a British author and composer who had a long and prolific writing career that included publication of his best-known novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962).

Mickey Rooney (1920–): Rooney is an American film and television actor who has won both Academy and Emmy Awards.

Frank Herbert (1920–1986): Herbert was an American science-fiction writer best known for his best-selling novels in the *Dune* saga.

Isaac Asimov (1920–1992): Asimov was a Russian-born American author and scientist who wrote both science-fiction novels and popular science books; he is perhaps best known for creating the "three laws of robotics" that have become a cornerstone of debate on ethics in artificial intelligence.

some of the key issues in American life—capitalism, technology, the family, the role of imagination—in a context free of historical or political constraints.

A Writer of Tales Bradbury has written in all genres—stories, novels, plays, poetry—but his real mode is short fiction. His plays, like *Pillar of Fire* (1975), are all adaptations of earlier stories, and his longer prose works are all, in some way or another, derivatives of the tale. The short novel *Fahrenheit 451* expands upon an earlier story, "The Fireman," which itself was an expanded version of a previous story, "Bright Phoenix." Both *The Martian Chronicles* and *Dandelion Wine* (1957) are frame collections, cycles of sketches and tales given thematic coherence (as in their model, *Winesburg, Ohio*) through the basic fact of geographical situation, a town or a planet. In each case many of the stories worked into the frames were published earlier as separate entities.

Bradbury's career as a storyteller can be divided into three periods: early, vintage, and late. The center of his early period is the Arkham House collection, *Dark Carnival* (1947). Bradbury himself considered these stories as oddities among his works. They are pure fantasy of the "weird" sort and include some of his most striking pieces. The vintage period extends, roughly, from 1946 to 1955. Its focal points are the story collections *The Illustrated Man* (1951) and *The Golden Apples of the Sun* (1953), the frame collection *The Martian Chronicles*, and *Fahrenheit 451*.

COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Bradbury is noted for writing science fiction that explores lasting questions of morality, particularly the ethical treatment of people who are “different.” Here are some other works of science fiction that tackle similarly lasting questions about the moral treatment of others:

I, Robot (1950), short stories by Isaac Asimov. This collection of related short stories about robots in the twenty-first century focus on the themes of morality and humans’ interactions with machines.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968), a novel by Philip K. Dick. This novel about a bounty hunter of androids explores the issues of discrimination and persecution of minority groups.

Kindred (1979), a novel by Octavia E. Butler. This novel, which involves accidental time travel by an African American woman sent back to the pre-Civil War South, explores the ethical questions raised by slavery as well as broader philosophical questions such as humans’ impact on history.

Three thematic landscapes dominate this period: outer space, the future, and “odd corners” of the present or past. Bradbury’s late period begins with *Dandelion Wine* (1957). It evolves through the following collections: *A Medicine for Melancholy* (1959), *The Machineries of Joy* (1964), and *I Sing the Body Electric!* (1969). These titles reveal Bradbury’s increasing desire to treat the light and joyous side of human existence.

Works in Critical Context

Ray Bradbury is a widely popular writer who has suffered from critical neglect. While Bradbury’s popularity is acknowledged even by his detractors, many critics find the reasons for his success difficult to pinpoint. Some believe that the tension Bradbury creates between fantasy and reality is central to his ability to convey his visions and interests to his readers. Peter Stoler asserted that Bradbury’s reputation rests on his “chillingly understated stories about a familiar world where it is always a few minutes before midnight on Halloween, and where the unspeakable and unthinkable become commonplace.” Mary Ross proposed that “[p]erhaps the special quality of [Bradbury’s] fantasy lies in the fact that people to whom amazing things happen are often so simply, often touchingly, like ourselves.”

The Martian Chronicles *The Martian Chronicles* is Bradbury’s undisputed masterpiece. The publication of this book was an important event in the development of science fiction’s growing respectability. The book was

widely reviewed by a critical community that extended well beyond the science-fiction subculture, most notably by author Christopher Isherwood, who praised it lavishly in the journal *Tomorrow*. This praise has continued decades after the book’s original publication. As Morgan Harlow wrote in 2005,

The Martian Chronicles represents an original and serious work of artistic invention and vision, firmly grounded in literary tradition. It remains a force to be reckoned with, a pivotal work which has influenced the course of literature and the thinking of scientists and of ordinary citizens.

Ironically, Bradbury has been criticized by science-fiction readers, who complained that the Martian colonies in *The Martian Chronicles* are little more than transplanted small towns from the American Midwest of the 1920s.

Fahrenheit 451 *Fahrenheit 451* was the only work of Bradbury’s that would approach *The Martian Chronicles* in popularity and influence at the time of its publication. The novel was lavishly praised for its intensity, its engaging narrative, and its concise presentation. Critics, however, have faulted the novel for an overly sentimental portrayal of culture and its elitist view of the value of literature. As Jack Zipes wrote, the main conflict in the novel “is not really constituted by the individual versus the state, but the intellectual versus the masses” with the implication that “the masses have brought this upon themselves and almost deserve to be blown up so that a new breed of book-lovers may begin to populate the world.” Critics tend to agree, however, that the book represents some of Bradbury’s central concerns. As one commentator put it, “*Fahrenheit 451* reflects Bradbury’s lifelong love of books and his defense of the imagination against the menace of technology and government manipulation.”

Responses to Literature

1. Bradbury is one of the most recognizable names in science fiction, yet many critics contend that he is miscategorized in this genre. In what ways does the label “science-fiction author” distort Bradbury’s literary legacy, and in what ways does this label accurately classify him?
2. Bradbury’s writings typically present an optimistic outlook on technological progress. In what ways have the passing of time and development of technology validated or undermined this optimism? If Bradbury were a young writer today, would he have a similar attitude about technology, or would the current state of technological usage be likely to produce a more pessimistic outlook?
3. Bradbury often drew on his childhood experiences and thoughts to help craft his stories. Write a short story based on a memorable childhood experience, or write an essay that discusses how a strong

impression from your childhood has shaped the person you are today.

4. Choose one of Bradbury's science-fiction stories that seems to have an outdated take on technology and rewrite it in a present-day context with the kind of technological devices common in the twenty-first century.

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William Bradford

BORN: 1590, Austerfield, Yorkshire, England

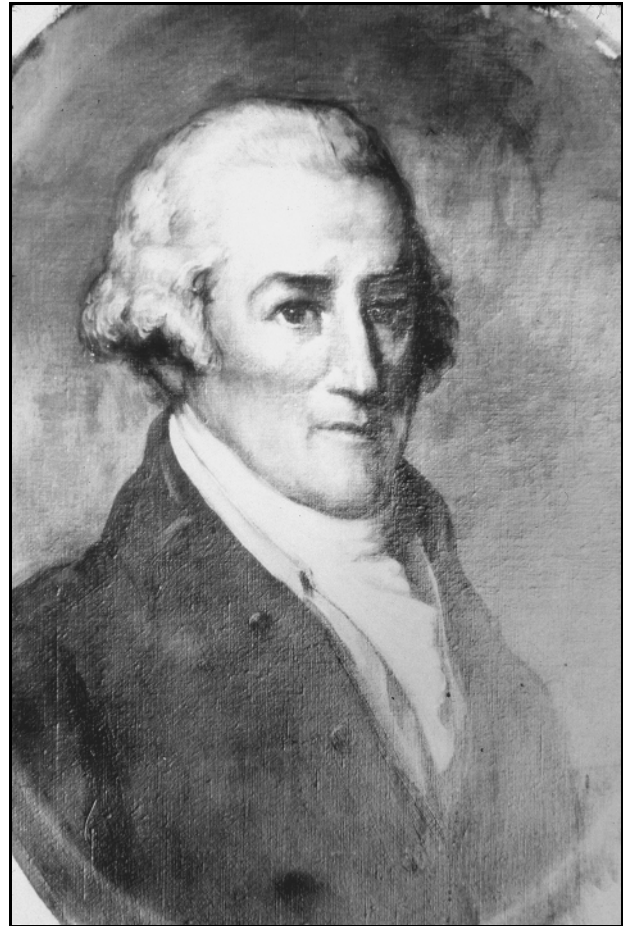
DIED: 1657, Plymouth Colony

NATIONALITY: British, American

GENRE: Nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

Of Plymouth Plantation (1620–1647)



William Bradford MPI / Hulton Archive / Getty Images

Overview

William Bradford was an English Puritan who came to North America aboard the *Mayflower* and served as governor of Plymouth Colony. He aided in the survival of the colony and chronicled the life of the colonists during their first three decades in the New World.

Works in Biographical and Historical Context

A Puritan across the Sea Bradford was born in Austerfield, Yorkshire, England, early in the spring of 1590. His father, William Bradford, was a substantial yeoman farmer and his mother the daughter of the village shopkeeper. Within a year of his birth, his father died, and his mother soon remarried. Bradford was raised by a grandfather and uncles. He began to read the Geneva Bible at the age of twelve and attended a Puritan church. Puritans believed that the Anglican Church—the official church of England—had become too similar to the Catholic Church in some ways and sought to create a “purer,” separate brand of Christianity for themselves. Since they had disavowed the official church of the land, they were