

Fahrenheit 451: *The Temperature at* *Which Books Burn*

by
Ray Bradbury



When Ray Bradbury (1920—) graduated from high school, he was already committed to a writing career in science fiction. From the beginning his short stories and novels showed a personal concern about what Bradbury perceived as the dehumanizing effect of the rapid growth of technology. Themes of evil, or at least misused technology, and victory of the human spirit are the focus of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Events in History at the Time of the Novel

An uncertain era. Bradbury wrote the story that would grow into *Fahrenheit 451* in 1950, a time when relations between the world's two most powerful nations were uneasy. In what would come to be known as the Cold War, the tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States—essentially a battle between capitalism and communism—were played out on numerous economic, political, and territorial fronts around the world, but primarily in Europe. The end of World War II five years earlier and the resulting disagreements about how to divide the spoils of war in a devastated Europe, and which system would win out there, had launched the Cold War. A scramble for spheres of influence, beginning with Germany, divided Europe and set in motion a world competition that was to last

THE LITERARY WORK

A science fiction novel set in a large American city in the near future; published in 1953.

SYNOPSIS

A fireman lives in an era when the fire department has the task of starting fires to destroy books. One day he encounters a teenaged girl, and their chance meeting leads the fireman to reexamine his life.

through the century. In 1945, the provisional French president Charles de Gaulle had allowed the country's communist party to be included in its newly recreated political system. Only a year later, the West, to its alarm, discovered that the communist party was one of the three largest political parties in France. In another part of the world, China's communist party—in control of 100 million people in North China by the end of the war—grew until it overwhelmed its opponents in 1949 and proclaimed the country the People's Republic of China, a communist nation.

Back in 1946, the wartime prime minister of Great Britain, Sir Winston Churchill, speaking in the United States, warned that an “iron curtain” had closed Eastern Europe to the view of



the West. Behind this curtain, Josef Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, bolstered communist ideology by destroying books that depicted life and history in the non-communist West in a too-favorable light, and by forbidding future publication of such books. It was a policy that had been practiced with some success by Adolf Hitler during the 1930s as he created a fascist dictatorship in Germany. Soviet censorship made the events behind the iron curtain difficult or impossible for the Western world to monitor, and as a result average citizens of the noncommunist world had a fearful view of the communist system. Distrust among the former wartime allies grew partly as a result of what was unknown on each side.

Censorship. *Fahrenheit 451* is a story built around book-burning, but that action is representative of all sorts of censorship. As the author states in a coda to the novel, “The point is obvious. There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, p. 176).

After World War II, the threat of communism led to a panic in the United States as rumors surfaced about communist spies active in Canada. A U.S. House of Representatives member from California, Richard Nixon, had won election in 1946 by suggesting communist leanings of his opponent. In Washington he gained prominence on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), an investigative body set up to look into possible communist elements in the government. Prodded by Congress, President Harry Truman directed the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Civil Service Commission to investigate the loyalty of all federal employees. Some 3 million workers came under the inspection of government agencies—yet just 300 were dismissed for disloyal ideas while 2,900 resigned their positions in protest. The government desire to weed out any “foreign” ideas grew as Whitaker Chambers, an editor of *Time* magazine and a confessed Soviet spy, accused Alger Hiss, a former State Department official, of providing classified documents for transmittal to the Soviets during this decade. Hiss denied the charges but in 1950 was convicted of lying under oath, for which a federal court sentenced him to five years in prison. Back in Congress, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy carried on and escalated the virtual witchhunts that had begun with Nixon and the HUAC. McCarthy became especially focused on finding communists in the State Department and then the U.S. Army.

There was a frenzy to eliminate any ideas suspected of socialist or communist leanings, and as a result some ninety mostly harmless or even useful organizations were listed by the U.S. attorney general as wellsprings of communist doctrine. Attempts to censor news sources resulted in blacklists of writers and performers in the motion picture, radio, newspaper, and fledgling television industries. These frantic attempts to censor ideas grew from 1950 to 1953 as Senator McCarthy continued to pursue his destructive investigation of almost everyone with whom he disagreed and produced long lists of people with imagined connections to communism. *Fahrenheit 451* stands as a type of protest against such activity and the threat it poses of establishing the “Tyranny of the Majority” and enforcing conformity (Mogen, p. 107).

The atom bomb. The end of World War II was hastened by the Allied use of the atom bomb, a new device of mass destruction dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In a single bombing of Hiroshima, some 60,000 people were killed, allegedly saving many times that number of lives that might otherwise have been lost in an extended war. The bombings, however, left nations with a lingering fear that an enemy might develop a similar weapon and use it elsewhere. The United Nations, formed in 1945 as an international political body to maintain world peace, addressed the issue of regulating atomic weaponry soon afterward. In 1949, Cold War tensions increased dramatically when the Soviet Union successfully detonated an atomic bomb of its own.

Meanwhile wartime advances in technology led to improved aircraft and rocketry, making the delivery of atomic bombs possible from nearly every place on earth to any target. U.S. and Soviet scientists raced to improve both the weapons and the speed with which they could be delivered. In the Soviet Union, fighter planes reached speeds of 684 miles an hour. The United States countered with reconnaissance planes capable of flying at more than 500 miles per hour at very high altitudes.

The aircraft carrying weapons to the city in *Fahrenheit 451* fly at speeds of 5,000 miles per hour and carry such bomb loads that war, once declared, is over in a few seconds.

Television. After World War II, what had been only experimental forays into television broadcasting evolved into a full-scale industry, and the popularity of the new medium grew astronomically. In 1946 there were about a dozen broad-

casting stations in the entire United States and a few thousand viewers, who viewed the programs on screens so small that most required a magnifying glass mounted in front of the picture. Within ten years, there were about 450 stations in the United States broadcasting programs to 34 million receiving sets watched by more than 100 million viewers.

To the citizens of *Fahrenheit 451*, television is as big as life and disseminates all knowledge the government allows through a “family” that comes to include the viewers. Television has become so pervasive that one resident of the fictional city, ex-professor Faber, longs for and builds a miniature receiver—one that he can cover with his hand. *Fahrenheit 451*, as well as other stories by Ray Bradbury, have indicated his concern that such services as television and computers could fall into powerful hands that would use them to manipulate the human population. Indeed, early television appeared at first to be headed in that direction. Licensing became a tool for restricting television in the United States, while Great Britain, Canada, the Soviet Union, and Japan established government-controlled networks.

Fahrenheit 451 carries television technology into the future. The time setting for the story is unspecified but clues in the story suggest that it is a not-too-distant future. Trains, for example, no longer exist in the city but the tracks are still whole and identifiable. People show great enthusiasm for television, much as they did in the 1950s. Their sets, however, grow beyond the dimensions of sets in the 1950s or even the 1990s. In the story, some screens serve as an entire wall inside private homes, while more prosperous citizens build television rooms that resemble cinema, surrounding the viewer on four sides.

Other technologies. In 1950 computers were still almost novelties. Enormous, room-sized configurations of vacuum tubes and switches were beginning to solve complex mathematical problems. The computers were bulky and large. Still, *Fahrenheit 451* imagines a computer so small that it can be used to direct a robot’s movements and be programmed to sense and track a million different human scents.

Between 1950 and the future time of *Fahrenheit 451*, video and computer technologies have advanced to challenge the old ways of delivering information that once appeared only in book form. *Fahrenheit 451* reveals a concern for this change. Television is the sole source of information in Guy Montag’s city, and a computerized dog tracks down book lovers so that books can

be destroyed by fire. In the real world, however, the newer technologies seem to have made books more accessible than in 1950. The number of books published in 1985, for example, was more than four times the number published thirty-five years earlier.

THE PACE OF TELEVISION’S DEVELOPMENT



- 1930:** Station W2XBS begins experimental broadcasts
- 1931:** CBS begins regular broadcasts over station W2XAB
- 1936:** TV receivers on sale in England
- 1939:** TV receivers on sale in the United States
- 1941:** First licensed commercial transmitters, WNBT and WCBW, in New York
- 1946:** First TV sets on sale after World War II
- 1949:** First color TV broadcast
- 1950:** About 120 TV stations broadcast to 75 cities
- 1951:** First coast-to-coast TV broadcasts

Furthermore, censorship of ideas relaxed somewhat with the passage of time. There had been various laws against publishing so-called traitorous or lewd printed matter in the United States since colonial times. In force at the time of the writing of *Fahrenheit 451* was the Smith Act. Passed in 1940, the act outlawed printed matter that urged or advocated the overthrow or destruction of the national government or any of the state governments by force or violence. A 1951 Supreme Court ruling (*Dennis v. United States*) declared the Smith Act to be constitutional, and it was invoked in the virulent anti-communist campaign that swept the nation in the early 1950s. In 1957, a few years after the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*, the Supreme Court would modify the Smith Act, ruling that it could not be used to punish someone who merely advocates prohibited activities; to break the law a person actually had to engage in them. Senator McCarthy’s anticommunist campaign was discredited and the emptiness of his charges exposed in 1954. With his downfall, the anticommunist fervor lessened in the United States. In Bradbury’s view, though, the danger of censorship lurked elsewhere in the world, and so the novel’s relevance seems to be timeless: “For while Senator McCarthy has long been dead, the Red Guard in China comes alive and . . . books are

thrown to the furnace all over again. So it will go, one generation printing, another generation burning, yet another remembering what is good to remember so as to print again” (Bradbury in Mogen, p. 107). Communist China under Mao Zedong (Tse-Tung) was an especially apt model of censorship practices over the decades. Authorities suppressed writing that did not further government aims or that expressed “Western” ideas, and book banning and burning reached a fevered pitch during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Restrictions were relaxed over the decade, then reimposed in the 1980s; one generation printing books and the next one “burning” them, so to speak, just as Bradbury predicted.

The Novel in Focus

The plot. Guy Montag, the story’s protagonist, is a fireman in a large city. The role of firefighter, however, has become very specialized. The city’s buildings are sheeted with fireproof materials so that firemen no longer need to worry about extinguishing blazes. Instead Guy and his co-workers, including a robot dog, ferret out books and burn them under orders from the government. This the firemen do with great pleasure—even as the city is threatened with total destruction by greatly expanded nuclear bomb loads carried by supersonic planes capable of speeds of 5,000 miles an hour.

For most of the citizens, the book-burning seems acceptable, even desirable. They receive all the information that the government feels is good for them through state-run television. The only acceptable thoughts come from the television “family,” for whom books are the enemy. The players on television become very real members of the family in each household (which, more often than not, lacks children—children have become unpopular in this society). Relief from the monotony of this television-locked world comes in the form of mind-numbing drugs. In this atmosphere, Guy’s wife, Mildred, along with many of her friends, becomes a pill addict.

The drug problem has grown so that the city’s medical workers respond to a dozen calls each day to rescue people, mostly women, who have overdosed. It is such a common occurrence that doctors do not respond to the calls but send medical mechanics to do the work. Two technicians frequently rescue Millie. In the end, she lives to denounce her own husband, calling the firemen to report his cache of books.

On one occasion, the firemen are tipped that an old woman has books stored in her attic. A raid proves that to be true, and the books are burned. The law requires that the old woman be taken away and the entire house be set ablaze. But the woman resists by deliberately setting fire to the home and to herself. Guy is very shaken by the sight of the old woman burning to death in defense of her own ideals. He begins to wonder how the book-burning began and why most of the people of the city come to believe in it.

A chance acquaintance with Clarisse McClellan, an almost-seventeen-year-old girl who wants to live freely and question everything, changes Guy’s life. He becomes curious about books and how their censorship began. An answer comes from a least likely source. Captain Beatty is at the moment a dedicated fireman, but he has obviously read books and, sometime in his life, loved them. It is Beatty who explains how the practice begins over and over throughout history. First there is conditioning—by television in his own city and by picture books and sports. People are inundated with nonthinking activities. “More sports for everyone, group spirit, fun, and you don’t have to think, eh? . . . More cartoons in

books. More pictures. The mind drinks less and less" (*Fahrenheit 451*, p. 57).

Another issue, according to Captain Beatty, made books expendable or even undesirable, at least items that no one cared about enough to purchase.

Now let's take up the minorities in our civilization, shall we? Bigger the population, the more minorities. Don't step on the toes of the dog lovers, the cat lovers, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico. . . . The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy, remember that! All the minor minor minorities with their navels to be kept clean. Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters.

(*Fahrenheit 451*, p. 57)

In the frenzy to appease everyone, books become empty shells and no one cares when they are banned or burned.

Guy grows more curious and begins to read. This is permitted of a fireman for a short time, but Guy becomes committed to saving books. He soon falls victim to the robot; his stolen books are discovered and his home destroyed. Even as enemy bombers approach the city, Guy is forced to run from his fellow firemen, choosing to follow a river and then an abandoned railroad track out of the city. From a distance he watches the entire city explode under the superbombs. Guy follows the abandoned tracks away from the city until he finds a group of scholars who have a unique way of preserving the information in the destroyed books.

Book burning and the human spirit. In the decade before the novel was published, there was plenty of evidence of "people running about with lit matches," as Bradbury discussed in the novel's coda. Adolf Hitler in Germany and Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union had used book-burning demonstrations to rally supporters and intimidate those with opposing views. Authors had been suppressed through state-directed writers' organizations. Persistent writers with challenging views were thrown into jails or exiled. Then, in the United States, "book-burning" took the path of psychological persecution as meted out by Senator Joseph McCarthy in his anticommunist campaign.

No matter how oppressive the book bannings, however, there were always those who resisted censorship. Prominent writers and actors, for example, resisted McCarthy by refusing to testify

before his Senate committee at the risk of being banished from their trade. The people of *Fahrenheit 451* accept book-burning—except for a few citizens of the city. The firemen's official activities provide brief diversions when flames shoot up and the robot hound equipped with a hypodermic-needle tongue paralyzes the offending book-lover. Yet even under these conditions humane people of courage and intellect appear again and again in *Fahrenheit 451*. The story tells of a future world dominated not only by electronic media and superweapons, but by the indomitable human spirit capable of ultimate victory over machines and technology. The human spirit is revealed by Clarisse, the teenager who refuses to stop thinking, enjoying nature, and questioning. Guy, the fireman, is infected by this free spirit, and her mysterious disappearance is a stimulus to him and leads to his daring to collect books.

DRUGS IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA



The abuse of pills in *Fahrenheit 451* raises the question of how prevalent drugs had become in mid-twentieth-century America. In fact, the 1950s saw a nationwide scare, especially in regard to increases in the heroin use. Popular journals such as *Newsweek* reported in 1950 and 1951 on the revival of drug use, and people feared that it threatened to spread throughout American society. To counteract the perceived threat, Congress passed the 1951 Boggs Act, which laid out increasing fines and prison sentences for first-time, second-time, and third-time offenders in drug trafficking. State and local regulation also increased to the extent that it permitted narcotics agents to carry firearms. At the same time pockets of society began to call for medical rather than police-type control and to regard drugs as an option for people outside of its traditional user base, the underclass: "The events of the 1950s demonstrated that some drug experiences appealed to people who seemed normal. They took drugs . . . for mere pleasure or relaxation. The delinquency model that had reigned since the 1920s . . . was not the final word" (Morgan, p. 147).

Another encounter with the undying human spirit comes when Guy meets the elderly ex-professor Faber. He has kept his mind active by inventing useful electronic tools such as miniature radio receiver-transmitters and small television receivers. This old gentleman helps Guy plot to

revive the printing of books and, when that endeavor comes too late, to escape punishment for his book-reading. The ultimate victory of humanity over technology, however, is reflected in Guy's encounter with a group of campers along the railroad tracks. They are scholars dedicated to a single purpose. Members are admitted to this impressive group if they have committed to memory any part of the world's great literature. Collectively, they plan to preserve the world's knowledge in the face of government persecution and nuclear holocaust.

Sources. Direct sources for *Fahrenheit 451* are Bradbury's own tales. In 1947 he wrote the short story "Bright Phoenix" about a small town whose inhabitants defy government book-burnings by each committing to memory one of the texts. This idea of government book-burners grew into a novella called *The Fireman*, which appeared in the magazine *Galaxy Science Fiction* in 1951 before finally being developed into the novel *Fahrenheit 451*.

Horror at the rise of Adolf Hitler is what inspired the novel's original premise. In Bradbury's view, burning books was burning people. "When Hitler burned a book," said Bradbury, "I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as burning a human, for in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh" (Bradbury in Mogen, p. 107).

That Bradbury's concern was more about the suppression of ideas than the destruction of books per se is evident from his attitude to new technologies. Over the years, Bradbury seems to have softened his position on technology, although he still refuses to learn to drive an automobile. In an interview in the 1990s, Bradbury was asked if he thought books were in danger from the new computer and television technology. By then Bradbury had accepted the electronic medium. Books, audiotapes, videotapes—in his view, they were all forms of literature.

The novel's reception. *Fahrenheit 451* was published in 1953. Ray Bradbury had already gained writing fame with a series of stories called *The Martian Chronicles*. The new novel, therefore, had a ready audience of science fiction addicts and Bradbury fans.

Critics, however, were only mildly positive toward the book. Its publication only a few years after the birth of the atomic age placed it in the realm of dystopian literature, works about wretched or miserable imaginary places. *Fahrenheit 451* was soon being compared with other books in this genre, notably with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. (also covered in *Literature and Its Times*). Critics focused on a perceived weakness in the novel—too rapid and inadequate character development and identification of events. But finding positive elements in the novel as well, they generally accepted it as a worthwhile work. In a review, critic Kingsley Amis wrote, "The book emerges quite creditably from a comparison with *Nineteen Eighty Four* as inferior in power, but superior in consciousness and objectivity" (Amis in Bryfonski, p. 68). A review in the *Nation* (December 19, 1953) praised the novel as one of the most brilliant social satires to be published in recent times. Perhaps most importantly, Bradbury succeeded in meeting his own goal—to rewrite the original novella, *The Fireman*, into a longer story that retained the intense pace of his shorter fiction. The result, again in Amis's words, is a "fast and scaring narrative" (Amis in Mogen, p. 110).

For More Information

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