

## **Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451**

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Ray Bradbury's book, Fahrenheit 451, is, without a doubt, one of the most famous science fiction stories of our time. However, what some may not realize is that, as well as having science fiction elements, Fahrenheit 451 is packed with major political and cultural statements about censorship by the media and popular entertainment. However, before we can understand the book, we must first understand the man behind it.

Born in Waukegan, Illinois, in 1920, Bradbury first became interested in books and writing when he was just seven years old. His aunt read to him from Edgar Allen Poe, Wilkie Collins, and L. Frank Baum. When Bradbury was eight, the comic "Buck Rogers" appeared in his newspaper, enticing him into the already very appealing world of fantasy. He got his first typewriter when he was 12 and began writing his own simple short stories. When he was 15, he decided he wanted to be a short story writer and that he wanted to someday have his works appear in Best American Short Stories. Around this time he started sending his stories to various magazines. When he graduated from high school, instead of going on to college, he sold newspapers for three years while still writing fiction. When he was 21, his first sold story (a collaboration with Henry Hasse) appeared in Super Science Stories.

Some of Ray Bradbury's most famous books include The Illustrated Man, Dandelion Wine, and Fahrenheit 451. The Illustrated Man is a collection of tales told by the living tattoos that covered a tortured man. Each tattoo tells a unique and bizarre story such as "The Veldt," about a virtual reality room in a house that has gone wrong.

Dandelion Wine is a semi-biographical novel about childhood in a whimsical place called Green Town. However, the most famous work is the tale of a society-gone-awry, Fahrenheit 451. Evidence of Ray Bradbury's enjoyment of using science fiction to portray modern practices out of control, it takes place in a futuristic society where all forms of literature are burned. It is a grave warning to the rising censorship in our culture.

Indeed, in Fahrenheit 451, the strongest political message is that all books are burned by a government organization whose personnel are known as firemen. They make fires instead of putting them out. This demonstrates that censorship is not something to be toyed with because it will get out of hand and you will be left with something akin to the state of things in Fahrenheit 451, namely, an unconscious population who allow the rulers to wage nuclear war and punish protesters without trials.

Another political message in Fahrenheit 451 is conveyed through the horrific Mechanical Hound, a deadly robot that can be programmed by the government to track down those considered to be criminals by scent. It comes loaded with deadly morphine that it injects into its victims. Apparently it is also available as a kind of watchdog for one's home. The Hound expresses how desensitized this society is to killing and the death penalty itself. Here in the real world, people still fight over it but in Fahrenheit 451, no questions are asked; they just send out a Hound to get the "bad guy."

The last major political message in Bradbury's book is that wars against perceived enemies are nearly constantly waged by the government in the Fahrenheit 451 world, but people do not even care. They might not even notice if it is not announced. In the book,

there is even a lady whose husband is sent off to fight, but she does not care in the least. This is also a demonstration of the desensitized society.

As well as political messages, Fahrenheit 451 has many cultural statements, too. First, there is the Parlor. Similar to our televisions, except much more so, it is instant passive entertainment for all four walls of people's living room (if they can afford it). Many people in Fahrenheit 451 consider the virtual family depicted in the Parlor their flesh and blood relatives. Also significant is the fact that critical thinking and curiosity are not encouraged in the society; in fact, they are downright discouraged. Clarisse is not welcome at school because she "thinks too much." She questions things and wonders why society is the way it is. As well as discouraging actual thinking, the Fahrenheit 451 government also discourages family ties. For instance, husband Montag and wife Mildred do not even remember where they met. Also, the police contacted Clarisse's grandfather and his family, just because they actually sat with each other and talked.

All these factors combined create a state of constant superficial happiness in the society. Books make people think about issues. So what do they do? Burn them. Anything that makes one unsure of one's ideals, or city, or country, is simply burned (whether literally or metaphorically). If it does not make people happy, there is no point to it for their society. This very state of constant "happiness" really depreciates the value of actually being happy. However, Montag realizes this and joins a rebel group fighting to keep emotions and actual thinking alive.

With the messages in this fifty-year-old book that are frighteningly applicable to our current state of affairs, it is clear we must pay more attention to our society to prevent it from delivering this sort of distorted existence. At the end of the book, Bradbury

leaves hope that maybe Montag and his group will revive civilization after it has fallen to its knees. Perhaps this is a sign that we too can fix the problems in our civilization.

[From Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451; Ray Bradbury, The Illustrated Man; “Ray Bradbury,” World Authors 1900-1950.

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