

## ***Ray Bradbury and the Secret Self***

Back in 2003 I interviewed Ray Bradbury on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*. He has some interesting and provocative things to say about that book and writing in general, so I thought I would post it here for anyone interested. Bradbury's career has been an unusual one in that, unlike such contemporaries as Vonnegut, he made the jump to mainstream credibility without repudiating his genre roots. Bradbury succeeded on his own terms. Significantly, when he received a [Pulitzer citation for lifetime achievement](#) in April of this year, it was specifically as a writer of science fiction and fantasy.

Without further ado . . .

PW: This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Fahrenheit 451*. Did you know as you were writing the novel that you'd hit on something special, or did the response take you by surprise?

RB: The response came over a fifty-year period, and it came over me very slowly. Ballantine put out the hardcover and the softcover on the same day in October 1953, and I think the hardcover sold about 5,000 copies, which isn't much. There were a few reviews, but not many, a few reactions from American authors, very pleasant. But I didn't realize that I'd done something that was going to stick around so long. The paperback edition sold maybe 50,000 copies in a year, which is more than 5,000, but it still isn't a bestseller.

PW: When did you start to realize that the book had real staying power, and had become, in fact, a classic?

RB: Only in the last couple of years, because of the interest of various cities and the reading programs of various mayors and libraries – they gave the book to the whole population to read. That was when it hit me.

PW: You must have had a pretty good clue by the time Truffaut's movie came out in 1966 . . .

RB: The movie was a mixed blessing. It didn't follow the novel as completely as it should have. It's a good movie; it has a wonderful ending; it has a great score by Bernard Hermann. Oskar Werner is wonderful in the lead. But Truffaut made the mistake of putting Julie Christie in two roles in the same film, which was very confusing, and he eliminated some of the other characters: Clarisse McClellan and Faber the philosopher and the Mechanical Hound. I mean, you can't do without those!

PW: Wasn't *Fahrenheit 451* originally published in *Playboy* magazine?

RB: No, it was published in *Galaxy* magazine in February 1950 in a short form called "The Fireman." It was around 25,000 words. Then Ballantine came to me and asked me to add another 25,000 more, which I did. Then, sometime in the late summer of 1953, *Playboy* came to me. They had no money; they were just starting out, and they asked me if I had something I would sell to them for four hundred dollars, so they could get started. So I sold them *Fahrenheit 451* for four hundred dollars, and they published it in the second, third, and fourth issues of the magazine.

PW: They should have at least paid you four hundred and fifty-one dollars!

RB: (laughs) Yeah.

PW: Like many people, I first read *Fahrenheit 451* in school. Rereading it last week, I was struck by how well your imagined future meets the reality test. Better than Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, a novel to which *Fahrenheit 451* is often compared. To me, that book doesn't have a prophetic edge to it  
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anymore, while your book still does.

RB: Orwell was dealing with communism and his disillusionment with communism in Russia and what he saw the communists do in Spain. His novel was a response to those political situations. Whereas I was interested in more things than the political atmosphere. I was considering the whole social atmosphere of the impact of TV and radio and the lack of education. I could see the coming event of schoolteachers not teaching reading anymore. The less they taught, the more you wouldn't need books.

PW: It's that social element that seems the most prescient to me now. Not just because of the popularity of reality TV, the ubiquity of the Internet, but also—and actually, this *does* seem political—because of the similarity between the situation of the United States in *Fahrenheit 451* and the country today. In the book, the U.S. is involved in an ongoing, nebulously defined war. Combat jets are forever streaking overhead. The rest of the world hates us, and we can't understand why. To some people, this describes the current situation exactly, with an open-ended war against terrorism and armed conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, the latter in the face of worldwide protests. Do you think the country is moving closer to the fictional America you wrote about 50 years ago?

RB: Not for a moment. The main problem is education, not politics. The teachers of our country have to be taught to start teaching reading and writing in kindergarten, first grade. By the time children go to the second grade, they should know how to read and write completely, as was the case in other generations. I was in the first grade in 1926, and my teachers were all poor: they made eight hundred dollars a year, but they taught reading and writing completely by the end of the first grade. The government has nothing to do with that. The educational system needs to be corrected.

PW: Teachers still don't make very much money—

RB: It has nothing to do with pay. Either you love what you're doing, or . . . Look, I wrote for years, and I wasn't paid. My love carried me through all those years. I sold newspapers on the street corner. When I was twenty-two, I was making ten dollars a week. When I started making twenty dollars a week from selling stories, I quit selling newspapers. You're either in love with what you do, or you're not in love.

PW: One thing people sometimes forget about *Fahrenheit 451* is that the government doesn't begin by burning books—it's ordinary people who turn away from reading and the habits of thought and reflection it encourages. When the government starts actively censoring information, most people don't even bat an eye. How important is reading to the health of a democracy like ours?

RB: Let's imagine there's an earthquake tomorrow in the average university town. If only two buildings remained intact at the end of the earthquake, what would they have to be in order to rebuild everything that had been lost? Number one would be the medical building, because you need that to help people survive, to heal injuries and sickness. The other building would be the library. All the other buildings are contained in that one. People could go into the library and get all the books they needed in literature or social economics or politics or engineering and take the books out on the lawn and sit down and read. Reading is at the center of our lives. The library is our brain. Without the library, you have no civilization.

PW: What forms of censorship do you regard as the most dangerous today?

RB: There are none in our country. We have too many groups for censorship to be possible. We have Catholics and Jews and Protestants, and Republicans and Democrats, and women's libbers, and lesbians and homosexuals and bisexuals, and young and old . . . We're all watching each other, so there's no chance for censorship. The main problem is the idiot TV. If you watch local news, your head will turn to mush.

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PW: There seems to have been a decline in standards of journalistic objectivity, to put it mildly.

RB: It's not just substance; it's style. The whole problem of TV and movies today is summed up for me by the film *Moulin Rouge*. It came out a few years ago and won a lot of awards. It has 4,560 half-second clips in it. The camera never stops and holds still. So it clicks off your thinking; you can't think when you have things bombarding you like that. The average TV commercial of sixty seconds has one hundred and twenty half-second clips in it, or one-third of a second. We bombard people with sensation. That substitutes for thinking.

PW: But you foresaw all of that in the Fifties. I mean, the people in *Fahrenheit 451* are addicted to their wall screens . . .

RB: That's right.

PW: What else did you draw on to create the future world of *Fahrenheit 451*?

RB: That's hard to decide. I wrote the book because I love writing. All my stories are written in bursts of passion. So it's very hard to go back and recover all the things that went into it. But I remember when I was a kid, about twelve years old, they published radio scripts in the local paper for radio plays that would be broadcast with silences so you could play the part of a character yourself as you were listening. I carried that into the future of *451*.

PW: In the "Afterword" to *Fahrenheit 451*, you write about how the characters of Montag, Clarisse, and Beatty continued to speak to you long after the book was finished. Do your characters always come alive for you in this way . . . and are they always so insistent?

RB: Yes. Oh, yes. I just let them speak. I don't control them; I simply give them a podium and let them talk to me. All my good stories are told to me by the characters. I don't write my stories. They write me.

PW: Do you plot your stories in advance?

RB: No, no, no. I live my stories.

PW: I remember listening to a writer talk about her characters once. She said that she was the boss, and they were her puppets: they went exactly where she told them, did what she ordered them to do . . .

RB: You can't do that. That's bad writing. They must write you. They must control you. They plot me. I never control. I let them have their lives.

PW: Is that leap of faith scary?

RB: No, it's wonderful fun. I love my characters. I trust them.

PW: Many people have wondered what becomes of Montag after the novel ends. You provide some hints of what his life will be like following the nuclear conflagration that destroys the city and presumably much of the country, but did you ever consider writing a sequel?

RB: No. I always let my characters decide where their story ends. I've written a play and an opera of *Fahrenheit 451* which go into some things a little bit more, but the ending is always with the civilization

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coming alive again through the remembrance of the book people.

PW: What if Montag said, "Mr. Bradbury, my story isn't done. You need to write a sequel."?

RB: That could happen, I suppose. But it rarely does. I'm doing a sequel to *Dandelion Wine* now, forty years later, but the damn book has been in process for forty years. I don't know if it'll ever finish itself.

PW: Why do some things take so long?

RB: Who knows? My secret self is not telling me.

PW: You've written award-winning tales in almost every genre out there: mystery, science fiction, fantasy, horror, not to mention movies and television. Do you have a favorite genre or type of writing?

RB: I love everything. I love writing essays. I've got a huge new book of poetry, *They Have Not Seen the Stars*, which came out six months ago. I love writing plays; I've got three new plays opening here in L.A. at the end of the month, and more plays later this year.

PW: Which of your books and stories and characters are closest to your heart?

RB: Every one of them. They're all my children. When you love someone, you behave toward them with great affection, and that's true in writing just like everything else.

PW: Even a character like Beatty, who is in many ways the villain of *451*?

RB: Of course. You have to understand how Beatty became a burner of books. He has a history. He was a book reader, but after various crises in his life – his mother died of cancer, his father committed suicide, his love affair fell apart – when he opened the books, they were empty. They couldn't help him. So he turned on the books and burned them.

PW: This question may sound strange, but I mean it seriously; after all, you've described yourself as a magician! Do you believe there is magic at work in the world?

RB: Depends on what you mean by the word.

PW: Well, what do you mean by it?

RB: Through my love of words and my love of ideas and metaphors, I can convince you of the most unlikely things. That's what a magician does. He can make an elephant disappear on stage. I can make an entire world disappear or appear in a story. Or I can make dinosaurs fall in love with lighthouses. That's magic.

PW: One of the constants in your work over the years has been the importance of ordinary things and people in shaping and changing the world . . . as the Book People do in *Fahrenheit 451*. In your fiction, there is almost always hope for the future—yet your optimism is never facile.

RB: I believe that if you do your work everyday, at the end of the week or at the end of the month or at the end of the year, you feel good about all the things you did. It's based on reality, not a false concept of optimism. So if you behave well, if you write well every day, and act well, at the end of the year you'll feel good about yourself.

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PW: Isn't there something quintessentially American about that attitude toward work?

RB: I don't like labels like that. I've been influenced by all kinds of Irish writers: George Bernard Shaw, Sean O'Casey, William Butler Yeats, Oscar Wilde . . . Or in England, Charles Dickens. Yes, I was influenced by the nineteenth century American writers who wrote metaphors: Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe. But there's nothing purely American about me, I don't think.

PW: In the introduction to the recently published [\*Bradbury: An Illustrated Life\*](#), a wonderful book which I have spent hours immersed in . . .

RB: Isn't that an incredible book?

PW: It's just beautiful. In the introduction, you write about the importance of images in your work, and characterize your life as "a movement—a dance—among all these images." Is the source and meaning of these images a mystery which you attempt to unravel in your writing? Or is your writing more a celebration of the mystery?

RB: It's a celebration. At the end of a life, you look back and see what you did. My hero has been Frederico Fellini, the Italian director. He was a friend of mine twenty-five years ago. When I met him for the first time, he embraced me and cried, "My twin! My twin!" But he lived with the following saying: "Don't tell me what I'm doing; I don't want to know." He never looked at his films when he was making them. Never saw the dailies. Only when he finished shooting the film would he sit down with the projector and look at what he had done. I'm the same way. I don't believe in watching myself.

PW: When you look back over your career, what surprises you most?

RB: The whole thing! I've had a great life. I've been very lucky.

PW: What do you still want to accomplish as a writer?

RB: I want to do an opera.

PW: Do you still write every day?

RB: Every day for seventy years.

PW: We solicited questions from readers and teachers of your work, and selected two to ask you. I'll ask the teacher's question first.

What can teachers, educators, and parents do to instill a love of language in young people so that they appreciate the power of the word in a culture that is increasingly dominated by the visual?

RB: (laughs) Hand them a book, that's all. Science fiction, fantasy – my books have changed a lot of lives. My books are full of images and metaphors, but they're connected to intellectual concepts. Give one of my books to a twelve-year-old boy who doesn't like to read, and that boy will fall in love and start to read.

PW: What books did you fall in love with as a boy?

RB: The *Oz* books. *Tarzan* and *John Carter, Warlord of Mars*, by Burroughs. Jules Verne, at a certain  
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age. Edgar Allen Poe when I was nine. And H.G. Wells, who was very negative but very exciting, because when you're sixteen years old, you're paranoid, and H.G. Wells is a very paranoid writer. And a very necessary one.

PW: Finally, let me ask you the question selected from one of your readers.

How did you choose the literature to be remembered by the book people in *Fahrenheit 451*? I was particularly struck that you included the gospel of Luke to be remembered, whereas the movie chose not to do so.

RB: Why Luke? I don't know. I was raised in the Baptist church, and so I knew all those Biblical texts. And, of course, the other ones in the book, too. But I didn't really choose them. My subconscious picked for me.

PW: That secret self you talked about earlier.

RB: Yes. You have to believe in that self as a writer, or you shouldn't be doing it.