



Fahrenheit 451

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The Work

The first science fiction novel by Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* is an early example of a dystopian tale about a future world that is nightmarish rather than hopeful. In its imaginary world, police state “firemen” burn homes containing books, as all books are forbidden by law. The protagonist, Guy Montag, is a fireman who becomes drawn into the world of clandestine book-readers by a woman he meets. Eventually, he joins a group of outcasts trying to preserve literature by committing entire books to memory. While printed matter can be burned, memories cannot be erased.

The novel’s point of view is clearly against censorship. It depicts the general population as living in darkness, with huge television screens dominating their homes and radios constantly blaring in their ears. The authoritarian government has decreed that all writing is subversive, as it is inevitably contradictory and it allows people to become aware of unpleasant aspects of society. Montag’s conversion to reading is significant in that he suddenly finds himself in light rather than darkness. The book’s none-too-subtle message is that reading makes people aware of ideas that may be dangerous to a totalitarian state, but are absolutely necessary for clear thinking.

Although *Fahrenheit 451* is intended as a warning, not a prophecy, its anticensorship message has often been cited by opponents of book bannings in the United States.

Bibliography

Greenberg, Martin Henry, and Joseph D. Olander, eds. *Ray Bradbury*. New York: Taplinger, 1980 . This collection contains several essays discussing aspects of *Fahrenheit 451*. Extensive bibliography.

Johnson, Wayne L. *Ray Bradbury*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980. Deals with central themes related to science fiction and fantasy in Bradbury’s works.

Mogen, David. *Ray Bradbury*. Boston: Twayne, 1986. Provides biographical background as well as analyses of major works. Sees *Fahrenheit 451* as satire of the McCarthyism of the 1950’s, as well as a general attack on totalitarianism.

Spencer, Susan. “The Post-Apocalyptic Library: Oral and Literate Culture in *Fahrenheit 451* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.” *Extrapolation* 32, no. 4 (Winter, 1991): 331-342. Contrasts Bradbury’s more positive view of cultural development with the pessimistic historical determinism of Walter Miller’s post-doomsday novel.

Touponce, William F. *Ray Bradbury and the Poetics of Reverie: Fantasy, Science Fiction, and the Reader*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984. Applies reader-response theories to Bradbury’s works. Focuses on *Fahrenheit 451* as a critique of technological rationalism and the contemporary culture industry.

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