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Title: Fahrenheit 451

Written by: Ray Bradbury

Publisher: Ballantine Books

Date of Publication: 1953

Book Critique

The Author

Ray Douglas Bradbury was born in Illinois USA August 22nd 1920. He has published more than thirty books, more than 500 short stories, poems, essays, screenplays and plays. He Graduated from an LA high school in 1938 but carried his education no further and became a “student of life”.¹ He was first recognised for his visionary writing style with the publication of *The Martian Chronicles* in 1950, then *The Illustrated man* and in 1953 *Fahrenheit 451*, which was considered his masterpiece. His short stories have featured in more than 1,000 school curriculums as recommended readings.²

Bradbury’s endeavours have been credited by a myriad of awards such as the Prometheus Award for *Fahrenheit 451*. Others include; The O. Henry Memorial Award, the Benjamin Franklin award, the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement award and the Grand Master Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America and an array of others. Bradbury is one of the most celebrated among 20th and 21st century writers of speculative fiction.

Plot Summary

Fahrenheit 451 was written in 1953 toward the end of McCarthyism and at the beginning of the escalation of the Cold War. During this era McCarthy enforced the Army into removing “tainted” books from the overseas library until President Eisenhower ordered them back on the shelves.

Fahrenheit 451 is a dystopian novel set in the 24th century in a totalitarian society, following the tale of the central character, Guy Montag. Montag is a fireman, not the heroic life saving firemen we know today, but the kind with a socio-political responsibility of burning illegally owned books in the homes of their devout owners that appose suppressing dissenting ideas. Soon after the story progresses Montag begins to question the morality of his profession and in parallel, his life.

He is unfulfilled by his occupation and unhappy with a society unconcerned with reports of an impending atomic war which leads Montag questioning the ways of the world. In the beginning Montag develops a friendship with a 17 year old girl next door Clarisse McClellan. Her humanistic

attitude towards life and inquisitive nature has branded her an outcast to society that incites Montag to examine the path he has taken in his life. He soon realizes he is no longer happy in his job and personal life. His wife chooses to be no longer willing to participate in reality and has chosen to immerse herself in the interactive wall-TVs that resides in the parlor, seashell radios and an addiction to tranquilizers. Montag is sent over the edge when a routine burning results in the death of an elderly woman as she refuses to leave her burning home and library. Her home soaked in kerosene she lights a match and begs Montag to leave her. The woman's dedication to her books sparks the notion in Montag that emptiness inside him may be filled by the content of these books. He quickly realises he simply an instrument of destruction, supporting state censorship so he steals a book for himself. Following the incident he discovers his "anti social" muse has died in an automobile accident. Not surprising granted that 55mph is the minimum speed limit. Montag now refuses to attend work claiming to be sick. His Superior, Captain Beatty visits Montag in response, somehow being aware of the internal struggle that plagues the torn fireman. Beatty is aware Montag is possessing at least one book. He lectures Montag about the lack of political correctness in these books and the predominance of their current society, where uniformity and structure are administrated in comparison to the old society where free thought was encouraged and people freely expressed their differing opinions. Upon Beatty's departure he reveals to his anesthetized wife by opening the air conditioning unit in the ceiling that he has been hoarding books throughout his career, at least 20.

As the mechanical hound sniffs under the front door Montag frantically reads through the books to find answers. He has no choice but to turn to a former professor, Faber, that in his upstanding fireman days he had suspected of hiding books. Faber mentors Montag in the meaning behind the words in the books. They conspire to copy the books and plant them in firemen's houses to literally fight fire with fire. Faber communicates with Montag through a little invention of his called the "Green Bullet" which was inserted in his ear.

Later Montag becomes disgusted with his wife and her friends as they engage in nothing but idle gossip and lack of awareness or concern for the impending atomic war. He grabs a poetry book and begins to read. The woman, one in particular begins to weep without understanding why. Montag continues on to work as planned by himself and Faber to gather information to aid their rebellion. The alarm is raised and they firemen hop on the "salamander" and get ready to burn. To Montag's surprise they arrive at his home. He is ordered to burn everything. When an attempt of arrest is placed upon Montag he retaliates with a flamethrower, burning Beatty and the ruthless mechanical hound. A manhunt begins with *The Chase* being aired live on the giant

interactive Wall-TVs for all to see. After much effort Montag manages to thwart the newly sent hound that has the capable of detecting and memorizing the scents of up to 10,000 people. The viewers become bored very quickly as they are used to everything condensed and cut to the chase. To counteract this, the authorities publically arrest an innocent man with his face just blurred enough for the camera to please the impatient audience. After eventually fleeing his oppressive censored society Montag wanders into the country side bordering the city. He discovers an underground network of intellectuals who teach him that each of them hold a book inside their mind to pass onto the next generation. With his newfound hope for the future Montag witnesses the atomic destruction of his former city and dedicates himself to rebuilding a literate and cultural society.

Issues Raised In the Book

Censorship

Fahrenheit 451 has the constant evident theme of censorship. Paradoxically to the state-sponsored censorship it appears to have started among the people of their society. People had become weary and depressed with their lives, their solution? Take the objects that made them feel this way out of the equation. It began with literature, censoring particular publications that prompted thought and contemplation. This began to snow ball and before long censorship lead to banning of all books of all kinds by the government to prevent the masses from individual thinking which would keep them content and complacent. This new world now had no room for the individual or their creativity. "Coloured people don't like *Little Black Sambo*. Burn it. White people don't feel good about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Burn the book." – *Captain Beatty*. This extreme political correctness intertwined and supported by a lazy, depressed and weary society has lead to the intense over bearing blanket of censorship in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Society today has also experience censorship on a large scale, maybe not to the extent of the novel but definitely to the extent that it cannot be ignored. Schools and colleges ban books from libraries, media can only reveal so much to the public to what we are allowed to know and what we are kept in the dark about. Up to recent times the internet has been more or less free from the conventional media censorship. One of the early nicknames for the internet was the "Information Superhighway" because of its ability to accommodate most people with an abundance of digital information if they so desired. For others, this freedom of information is starting to throw up major roadblocks in the form of Internet Censorship and it's starting to spread across the world.

Motivations for internet censorship range from good-intentioned acts to protect children from unsuitable content to the other end of the spectrum, authoritarian attempts to dictate a nation's access to information as it is the case with China. E.g. China has its own personal virtual policing JIngjing and Chacha that pop up every 2 hours in internet cafes to remind users to use correct web browsing habits and China has 48 Internet users imprisoned (as of 2008) and it has the largest number of internet users in the world. Not only is censorship a tool for governments but it is also on the consumer market from software companies to limit or block specific sites using web filters.³ SOPA(Stop Online Piracy Act) is a Bill to expand the ability of authorities to fight online trafficking in copyrighted intellectual property and counterfeit goods. This bill also gives authorities the right to request court orders to bar particular advertising companies and payment facilities to conduct business with infringing websites and in particular search engines linking to these sites.⁴ This is put into place to protect producers of content but in turn can also stop the individuality and creativity of the average person with a camera, audio mixing program, PhotoShop, etc. E.g. A woman placed a video YouTube of her baby dancing with the artist Prince playing in the background. Her intention was not to infringe on the copyright but to simply show her child dancing. This woman was taken to court. As articulated in the book *Fahrenheit 451*, censorship can lead to the ousting of individuality and freedom of expression.

Knowledge versus Ignorance

A theme that is in parallel with censorship is knowledge versus ignorance. People are hostile towards books because they do not want to feel inferior to those who have read more books than they have. The role of the fireman is to destroy the written form of knowledge and promote ignorance in order to make the population intellectually equal. "We must all be alike, not everyone **born** free and equal like the constitution says, but everyone **made** equal."- Captain Beatty. Intellectual is known as a swear word now. Clarisse McClellan is regarded as "anti-social" as she wants to interact and discuss issues with her peers. In this society questions are seen in a bad light. Clarisse didn't ask how things were done she ask why. Asking questions apparently made her unhappy and after her death she is referred as being lucky to be dead. Cold hard facts are fed to the people "Bing, Bing, Bing". Philosophy and Sociology are of no use to anyone. "Out of the nursery, into college and back into nursery, There's your intellectual pattern for the past 5 centuries or more" – Captain Beatty.

Captain Beatty's Utilitarian approach to society

Utilitarianism is the ethical theory that suggests the appropriate action is the one that amplifies overall "happiness". The moral worth of an action is actuated by its resulting outcome and that can

only weigh the morality of an action after being aware of all its consequences. Utilitarians are a group of consequentialists that believe that the outcomes of government and other political policies such as business can be predicted and measured. "Public policies should be judged by their consequences" – John Stuart Mill. ⁵ Captain Beatty discusses with Montag that the bigger the population the bigger the minorities. Beatty believes strongly in the idea that as long as no one is offended and everyone is happy that the means, such as burning people to death who do not follow the status quo, of this has no implication whatsoever. Toes cannot be stepped on in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*. "The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy, remember that!" Society in this book is happy to be spoon fed information with neither question nor a second thought as long as they are happy. "If you don't want a man politically unhappy don't give him two sides to a question to worry him, give him one". – Captain Beatty.

Technology and its Influence

Another factor that Bradbury ties into the reason behind the lack of interest in intellectual thinking and reading is the influence of technology. Included is the popularity of competing forms of entertainment such as the Wall-TVs that reside in the parlor of people's homes. These TVs are interactive to the point that the owner is given the script of a show that will be displayed later on in the day where they can edit in their names for example. The parlor walls also harbour family members that can interact with anyone in the room. Seashell radios are also branded a culprit to the droned out thoughts of the population. At one point in the book Montag wishes he had a seashell radio so he could communicate with his wife. She is completely taken over by the technology that she has no thoughts of her own. She can't remember everyday tasks on her own anymore even to the point where she takes too many pills by accident and nearly kills herself, which is no problem as they have an electronic snake like equipment that will suck out all the bad and replace everything including fresh clean blood.

Bradbury also articulates that the presence of speeding cars, overbearing music and advertisements creates a lifestyle that overbears the population with stimulation and not enough reflection and concentration. Also before the complete banning of books, classics were condensed into a collection of one page summaries. "Now at last you can read all the classics". Billboards are now made 5 times bigger than before to keep up with the speed of the passing vehicles. Technology dominates this society. Clearly Bradbury is concentrating on the negative influence of technological development in the real world and the destructive potential of technology in the world. *Fahrenheit 451* does have elements of the real world today. Associations can be easily made in regards to

addictive multimedia being used in present times. The time spent on the internet, reality TV, gaming etc. People prefer to text or email or any other type of virtual communication rather than face to face interaction. The seashell radios in the book were thought up by Bradbury before the invention of the walkman or iPod.

Comparison to George Orwell's 1984

Both *George Orwell's 1984* and *Fahrenheit 451* were both written around the same time and examine similar topics. They share common themes such as the fear of a technological unknown future and they both present political statements that have held true from the 50's until now. Both novels depict alienation and isolation through the main character. E.g. Winston is depicted as outcast to the rest of society. He is aware that life is not what it should be and writes his thoughts about this in his journal, which is highly illegal. Winston lives in a society governed by Big Brother where people are prohibited to speak out, or think out against the government. If a person appears to have a different thought than what was mandated by big brother they were arrested by the thought police and later vaporized. Both authors emphasize the governing censorship through technology. Another theme that both novels share is the destruction of human values. In 1984 children are trained to report their own parents of thought crime. The destruction of human values are also violated in *Fahrenheit 451*, Teenagers are mentioned in book to be killing each other and hurting one another for fun. "I'm afraid of children my own age. They kill each other. Did it always used to be that way?" – Clarisse McClellan. The people of the society do not have consideration for one another. Physical communication is at a bare minimum. Society cares more about fictional characters on their wall-TVs rather than real people.

Fahrenheit 451 describes better imagery than 1984. "His eyes all orange flame with the thought of what came next he flicked the igniter and the house jumped up in a gorging fire that burned the evening sky red and yellow and black" whereas 1984 has more challenging vocabulary. Both novels go into great detail, which allow the reader to become immersed in the story. In today's world technology increases at such a fast pace these novels are just as relevant as ever.

Conclusion

Many of Bradbury's ideologies show some parallels between the fictional society in *Fahrenheit 451* and today's world. Much of what is imagined in *Fahrenheit 451* has come true or at least has come close to coming true in modern society. The most important aspect of reading books such as these is

to realize the importance of not letting society slip so far away from actually being social, which is a problem today.

¹ Good Reads, 2011. *Ray Bradbury*. [online] Available at:
<http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1630.Ray_Bradbury> [Accessed 09 April 2012].

² iBid

³ Strickland, J. 2009. *How Internet censorship works*. [online] Available at:
<<http://computer.howstuffworks.com/internet-censorship.htm>> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

⁴ Wikipedia, 2012, *Stop Online Piracy Act*. [online] Available at:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop_Online_Piracy_Act [Accessed 10 April 2012]

⁵ CSR|NYC Strategies, 2007. *Three types of ethics*. [Online] Available at:
<<http://www.csrnyc.com/ethicalbaseofcsr/threetypesofethics.html>> [Accessed 14 April 2012].