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— APPROACHING *Fahrenheit 451* —

For teaching purposes, you may never find a novel more versatile than Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. From the student's point of view, it is definitely a winner. It has romance, violence, and rebellion. It is short, easy to read, exciting, and a little bit weird.

From the teacher's point of view, it is even better. *Fahrenheit 451* gives you

- a clearly developing main character
- a strong setting and tone
- a clearly stated theme
- a simple, direct plot
- a handful of easy-to-understand symbols

Other benefits include a strong sense of irony; dozens of Biblical and other literary allusions; some extremely poetic prose; characters who act as foils and confidants; clever titles for both the book itself and its parts; and even a good epigraph. In addition to these, there is a full-length film version, readily available on video.

Fahrenheit 451 was written in 1953 about an America in the distant future, but in the few decades since, the story is starting to come true. Such a development is not surprising, but it is significant. Why not surprising? Most science fiction is set in a super-scientific future, in a world filled with "impossible" technology. Nevertheless, the speed of technological change in the twentieth century has continually outstripped predictions. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury imagines cars that travel at 200 miles per hour, miniature two-way radios, computerized robots, and wall-size television sets. All of these are available now; some are commonplace. Most science fiction also includes strong social criticism; *Fahrenheit 451* is no exception. Its key criticism is that American society is turning away from books, freedom of speech, and a thoughtful citizenry, and turning toward TV, censorship, and mindless public acceptance of lies and government repression. The story specifically predicts book-burning, widespread drug use, legalized abortion, and a trend toward teenage suicide. All of these have occurred in the recent past and continue to be highly visible social issues.

Such social criticisms are central to the meaning of the book. For students to understand *Fahrenheit 451*, it is important for them to consider current events and to think about the consequences of spending hours watching television or using drugs, as opposed to reading books and studying history. *Fahrenheit 451* operates as an explanation, in parable form, of why we should read and learn as individuals, in the face of a mass-culture which discourages such study.

Most important, this point is made so simply and so powerfully that the reader cannot miss it. As a result, the story works with many different types of students and at many different levels. The structure of the story is too clear to mistake; the point is too significant to discount. The protagonist, a book-burning "fireman" named Guy Montag, must choose between two different worlds, one represented by his wife, Mildred, the other represented by a teenage girl named Clarisse McClellan. Montag has lived in Mildred's world all his life; she, like those around her, is a zombie. She overdoses on sleeping pills and forgets about it by morning, she watches her three-wall television all day long, and she thinks the characters on the TV are real. In contrast, Clarisse is alert and alive—characteristics

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that are at once amazing and unsettling to Montag. She wonders about things, all kinds of things. She tastes the rain, she thinks, she listens. She “wakes up” Guy Montag, who is at first confused, but then welcomes the things Clarisse cherishes. He becomes rebellious, and, finally, an outcast from society.

Students find *Fahrenheit 451* exciting and relevant to their own lives. Teachers will find that the story is constantly illustrated and “proven” by current events. Book-burning, for example, became a national issue in 1973 when a school board in Fargo, North Dakota, began burning books by Kurt Vonnegut, James Dickey, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner. Television soap operas have provoked many articles, including a TIME Magazine cover story called “Soap Operas: Sex and Suffering in the Afternoon” (January 1976). Like Mildred Montag, who believes the “parlor aunts and uncles” are real, American TV viewers send thousands of birthday cards and letters to fictional characters and soap opera stars. And, like the adolescent suicides of *Fahrenheit 451*, a wave of teenage suicides has begun to emerge in the U.S. in the last quarter of the century.

The history of *Fahrenheit 451* is a surprising one. Ironically, the book was itself bowdlerized in the 1970s by Bradbury’s own publisher. High-school students discovered the censorship and informed the author, who later wrote a special afterword about the ironic development. This odd and startling “proof” of the book’s argument is one more way of engaging the attention of increasingly jaded students. It can shock them into realizing that, yes, these things can happen. This fantastic book is about real life.

The versatility of the book is also remarkable. Late in the story, Montag discovers an “underground” group of people who have memorized the great books of history. This is a natural stepping-stone for a discussion of which books students would save, if they had to choose. Even reluctant readers, who seldom know the names of many famous books, can be coaxed “away” from the book into the underlying historical question of what is worth memorizing and preserving. A technique as simple as a class survey about “the most significant people in history” will lead back inevitably to the connection between books and history. The book naturally invites inquiry into precisely those human habits that produce books.

Along the way, students are reminded that names such as Socrates, Jesus, and Mohammed come to us from books; they often learn names of “new” people who have affected our lives, such as Marcus Aurelius and Erasmus, Pascal and Goethe, T’sai Lun and Sun Yat-sen. Along with these names come the names of books. And so, as Bradbury must have hoped, students concentrate on *which* books to save; they no longer question *whether* books should be saved.

In short, *Fahrenheit 451* is a book that inevitably leads readers to answer the question, *Why should we read books?* and offers the teacher numerous ways to show students *how* to read books. What more could one ask?

BACKGROUND

Author

Ray Bradbury was born in 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois, and lives in Los Angeles, California. One of the world's best-known science-fiction writers, he has written stage, television, radio, and screen plays; musicals and operas; poetry; a half-dozen novels; and over one thousand short stories. His books have been made into movies and television mini-series, including *The Illustrated Man*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, and *The Martian Chronicles*. He has had his own award-winning cable TV show, has helped design a ride for Disney World, has done consulting work in "city engineering and rapid transit," and has had a moon crater named after one of his novels by an Apollo astronaut team ("Dandelion Crater," after the book *Dandelion Wine*). His numerous awards include a story in *The Best American Short Stories of 1946*, one in *O. Henry Prize Stories of 1947*, a play in *The Best One-Act Plays of 1947–48*, an Oscar nomination for an animated-film screenplay based on his own story, "Icarus Montgolfier Wright," in 1962, and an award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters for *The Martian Chronicles*.

Fahrenheit 451, Bradbury's first and most famous novel, was written in 1953 and won the Gold Medal of the Commonwealth Club of California. It was written in play form for Charles Laughton in 1955 (not produced), and was made into a film in 1966 by Francois Truffaut. *Fahrenheit 451* has been called "almost the archetypal anti-utopia of the new era in which we live." (See below, *Critical Texts*, Greenberg & Olander, p. 196.) It is now considered a modern classic.

Ironically, Ray Bradbury, the great science-fiction writer and a lifelong resident of Los Angeles, does not drive a car or fly in airplanes. He is notorious for using a bicycle to get to business appointments.

Television

Television was commercially available for the first time in 1949. In 1953, when Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451*, hardly anybody in America seemed to have a television; kids would still get together to watch at the one house in the neighborhood with a TV. But by 1954, there was already one television for every five human beings in the nation. (*Statistics on Radio and Television 1950–1960*, quoted in *The media are American: Anglo-American media in the world*, by Jeremy Tunstall. London: Constable, 1977, p. 293.) No one could really know what television would become for Americans, but Ray Bradbury clearly had an intuition.

The new appliance was expected to be a kind of visual radio, an invention that had created a revolution in its own right. The radio created a new kind of imagination, because audiences learned to picture people and events that they could never see—so vividly heard, and yet invisible—and so the mind reached out to form its own pictures. But TV, instead of becoming "visual radio," became the movie-house-at-home. As such, it immediately began replacing newsreels at the movie theaters; thirty years later, as video-cassette-recorder ownership increases, theaters dwindle in numbers. Along the way TV has brought into being the nightly network news show, changing the face of news communication and threatening to replace the American daily newspaper entirely.