

## Synopsis and Orientation: *Fahrenheit 451*

### *Critical Thinking in Science Fiction*

#### Introduction to the Book

The three main sections of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* all end in fire. The novel focuses on Guy Montag, a fireman. In the first section, we discover that Montag is a professional book-burner, expected to start fires instead of putting them out. For years he has done his job obediently and well. Then one day, he is called upon to burn the books of a Mrs. Hudson, who prefers to die rather than leave her library. Furtively, Montag pockets some of her books, haunted by the idea that a life without books might not be worth living after all.

As Montag begins to read deeply for the first time in his life, *Fahrenheit 451*'s second section traces his growing dissatisfaction with the society he is paid to defend. He seeks out the counsel of an old man named Faber, whom he once let off easy on a reading charge. Together they agree to copy a salvaged Bible, in case anything should happen to the original.

Montag's boss at the firehouse, Beatty, senses his disenchantment and interrogates him until their confrontation is interrupted by a fire call. Responding to the address, Montag is expected to start a conflagration considerably closer to home.

*Fahrenheit 451*'s final section finds Montag seizing his own fate for the first time. He avenges himself on Beatty and strikes out for the countryside. There he finds a resistance force of readers, each one responsible for memorizing—and thereby preserving—the entire contents of a different book. As they bide their time in hope of a better future, a flash appears on the horizon: While society was staring at full-wall television screens and medicating itself into a coma, the largest fire yet has broken out.

The book's three holocausts expand concentrically. The death of a stranger by fire in the first third becomes the destruction of Montag's own house in the second. The implication is that, had Montag paid greater attention to his neighbor's plight, he might not have found himself in the same predicament soon afterward. Trouble down the street leads to trouble at home, and trouble at home to trouble abroad. For a book once pigeonholed as science fiction, this structural savvy is one more proof that Bradbury started out writing for the pulps and wound up writing for the ages.

#### Literary Allusions

**Walden** by Henry David Thoreau

A precursor to Granger's philosophy in *Fahrenheit 451*, Thoreau's classic account of the time he spent in a cabin on Walden Pond has inspired generations of iconoclasts to spurn society and take to the wilderness.

**Gulliver's Travels** by Jonathan Swift

Swift's satirical 1726 novel follows the journey of Lemuel Gulliver to a series of fanciful islands, none more improbable than the England he left behind. The Bradburian idea of using a distant world as a mirror to reflect the flaws of one's own society doesn't originate here, but this is one early expression of it.

**"Dover Beach"** by Matthew Arnold

Arnold's enduring poem about a seascape where "ignorant armies clash by night" has also lent lines to Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* and provided the title for Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*.

**The Republic** by Plato

The deathless allegory of the cave, where men living in darkness perceive shadows as truth, is unmistakably echoed in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*.

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#### Literature and Censorship

"The paper burns, but the words fly away." These words about book burning from the martyred rabbi Akiba Ben Joseph appear on one wall of Ray Bradbury's beloved Los Angeles Public Library—itsself the survivor of a horrific 1986 fire. They also underscore a truth too often ignored: Censorship almost never works. Banning or burning a book may take it out of circulation temporarily, but it usually makes people even more curious to read the work in question. Under Joseph Stalin and his successors, Russians banned questionable books and killed or imprisoned their authors, yet underground or samizdat editions passed from hand to hand and ultimately helped topple the Soviet system. Adolf Hitler exhorted his followers to burn books by Jewish or "subversive" authors, but the best of those books have outlasted Nazi Germany by a good sixty years. In an added irony, accounts of Nazi book burnings helped inspire *Fahrenheit 451*, one of the most haunting denunciations of censorship in all literature.

How ironic, too, that Bradbury's own indictment of censorship has itself been repeatedly censored. Fourteen years after *Fahrenheit 451*'s initial release, some educators succeeded in persuading its publisher to release a special edition. This edition modified more than seventy-five passages to eliminate mild curse words, and to "clean up" two incidents in the book. (A minor character, for example, was changed from "drunk" to "sick.") When Bradbury learned of the changes, he demanded that the publishers withdraw the censored version, and they complied. Since 1980, only Bradbury's original text has been available. As a result, some schools have banned the book from course lists. For all these attempts to sanitize or banish it completely, Bradbury has remained diligent in his defense of his masterpiece, writing in a coda that appears in some editions of the book:

*"Do not insult me with the beheadings, finger-choppings or the lung-deflations you plan for my works. I need my head to shake or nod, my hand to wave or make into a fist, my lungs to shout or whisper with. I will not go gently onto a shelf, deguttled, to become a non-book."*

#### Other frequently censored books

##### The Grapes of Wrath

Consistently ranked among the most often banned books in the American literary canon, John Steinbeck's 1937 novel has faced countless challenges from library systems and school districts. Among the most common complaints are its depictions of rural people as, to quote one petition, "low, ignorant, profane, and blasphemous."

##### To Kill a Mockingbird

The Committee on Intellectual Freedom at the American Library Association has listed Harper Lee's 1960 book as one of the ten most commonly challenged. Many school districts have banned it for its racial slurs and the occasional mild swear word.

##### A Farewell to Arms

Ernest Hemingway's third novel (1929) was a popular and critical success, though authorities in America and abroad disagreed. The book initially appeared as a five-part series in *Scribner's Magazine*, which Boston city officials banned as obscene. In Italy, it was deemed unpatriotic for its unflattering, and accurate, account of the Italian Army's retreat from Caporetto.

##### The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

The Concord Public Library in Massachusetts proscribed Mark Twain's enduring masterpiece as "trash suitable only for the slums" when it first came out in 1885. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People demanded its removal from New York City high schools in 1957 for a new reason: alleged racist content.