Censorship History of Fahrenheit 451

Author: Ray Bradbury

Fahrenheit 451 is an indictment of censorship and expurgation, so the fact that this book was expurgated and marketed by the publisher that way for 13 years before the author became aware of the abuse is particularly ironic. In 1967, Ballantine Books published a special edition of the novel to be sold in high schools. Over 75 passages were modified to eliminate such words as hell, damn, and abortion, and two incidents were eliminated. The original first incident described a drunk man who was changed to a sick man in the expurgated edition. In the second incident, reference is made to cleaning fluff out of the human navel, but the expurgated edition changed the reference to cleaning ears. No one complained about the expurgation, mainly because few people were aware of the changes and many had not read the original. The copyright page made no mention of the changes, but thousands of people read only this version of Fahrenheit 451 because the edition ran to 10 printings. At the same time, Ballantine Books continued to publish the "adult" version that was marketed to bookstores. After six years of the simultaneous editions, the publisher ceased publication of the adult version, leaving only the expurgated version for sale from 1973 through 1979, during which neither Bradbury nor anyone else suspected the truth.

In 1979, a friend alerted Bradbury to the expurgation, and he demanded that Ballantine Books withdraw completely the expurgated version and replace it with his original. The publisher agreed, and the complete version has been available since 1980.

This act of censorship had far-reaching effects for authors in regard to the school book clubs. The incident set in motion the American Library Association (ALA) Intellectual Freedom Committee, Young Adult Division. In 1981, the committee looked into expurgation by school book clubs, such as Scholastic, and found that all of them expurgated books to some extent. Using its clout, the ALA reminded the book clubs that it awards the Newbery and Caldecott medals for children's books, and the ALA also noted that buyers are attracted to books designated as "ALA Best Books." The organization warned that it would strip the award announcements from expurgated books. The ALA also alerted teacher groups to demand that an expurgated book in a school book club be clearly identified on the copyright page as an "edited school book edition."

In a coda that now appears in editions of Fahrenheit 451, Bradbury states, "I will not go gently onto a shelf, degutted, to become a non-book."

The "adult" version still has its critics. In 1992, students at Venado Middle School in Irvine, California, were issued copies of the novel with numerous words blacked out. School officials had ordered teachers to use black markers to obliterate all of the "hells," "damns," and other words deemed "obscene" in the books before giving them to students as required reading. Parents complained to the school and contacted local newspapers, who sent reporters to write stories about the irony of a book that condemns bookburning and censorship being expurgated. Faced with such an outcry, school officials announced that the censored copies would no longer be used.

Further Information


Citation Information