

## *Fahrenheit 451*

**Date:** 1953

**Author:** Ray Bradbury

**From:** *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*

Ray Bradbury's only science fiction novel is a dystopian allegory that received wide and favorable attention outside the field as well as within. The title is a reference to the supposed temperature at which books will burst into flame. The novel is a massive expansion of an earlier novella, "The Fireman" (1951), and is set in a future in which books have been banned because of their effects on the population, the perceived unhappiness that results from exposure to contrary ideas.

The protagonist is Guy Montag, whose job is that of a fireman—but in a delicious ironic twist, his job is to start fires, not put them out. Specifically he is part of a government agency dispatched whenever books are discovered, so that they can be burned. Initially Montag does not have any strong feelings about his work, either for or against; burning books is just his job, and he goes about it professionally and without emotion. But his private life is less than satisfactory and he feels vaguely estranged from the world and his wife, who is herself suicidal. Montag's uneasiness becomes more intense when he is called out on a job during which he encounters an elderly woman who is so attached to her books that she throws herself into the fire and perishes along with them.

Montag, who has in fact been concealing a small cache of books himself, even though he is uncertain about his motivations, subsequently has a series of conversations with other characters. One character presents the establishment viewpoint, stressing the importance of conformity, safety, and deference to authority. The other, a nonconformist, suggests that the lack of information, diversity of opinions, and freedom to act upon one's conclusions is a basic and fatal flaw in society. Influenced by the latter, Montag realizes that he has become a rebel. He encourages efforts to create an underground press and attempts to convince his friends that reading is an important right; but he is betrayed by those he trusted.

Montag is given the option of redeeming himself by burning his own books as a public gesture, and he does so—but as an act of defiance, not surrender, immolating a government official in the process. Rescuing a small number of books, Montag now finds himself a fugitive, hunted down by the very firemen with whom he once served. As a war breaks out, presumably loosening the grip of the oppressive government if not destroying it completely, he flees into the wilderness. There he finds a society of people who have undertaken the preservation of literature by each memorizing a complete book, which they can recite as needed. Montag ultimately becomes one of their number.

Like most dystopias, *Fahrenheit 451* takes a perceived trend in current society and extends it to an illogical extreme. In this case, Bradbury was undoubtedly reacting to the witch hunts of Senator McCarthy, which reverberated loudly in the artistic community, as well as expressing a general criticism of societal pressures toward conformity and uniformity of opinion. There is also a fainter concern about the misuse of technology. The people in Bradbury's future world have their views shaped by a homogenous mass media to which they are exposed on a regular basis. Although Montag's response to machines is ambivalent, there are times when he describes them in clearly negative terms.

Another expressed concern is what we would now term "political correctness." Bradbury asserts in the novel that the suppression of books originated within the mass of people, specifically special interest groups who objected to one or another set of unpopular or contrary views and insisted upon suppressing that subset of books, eventually leading to a wholesale banning as the only solution to the problem of "subjective" viewpoints. Bradbury's dystopia is not imposed by a small but powerful minority but by a large and thoughtless majority, and that message remains as valid today as it was when it was written.

### **Citation Information**

D'Amassa, Don. "Fahrenheit 451." *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2005. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 28 Aug. 2015.

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