INDEPENDENT READING

A GUIDE TO

Fahrenheit 451

Ray Bradbury

"There must be something in books, things we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there."

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Fahrenheit 451 is a science fiction novel, a disturbing story of a future civilization in which firemen burn books.

Setting: The future; an overcrowded, mechanized, pleasure-seeking, repressive society.

Protagonist: Guy Montag, a fireman, who after ten years of burning books suddenly recognizes their contribution to civilization.

Conflicts: An external conflict between Montag, who rejects book burning, and the fire captain, who defends it; Montag's internal conflict between accepting the new world—one of violence and conformity—and wanting to return to the way things were in the past—gentler, with room for different ideas.

Resolution: When Montag starts reading the books he has hidden away, he and the captain meet in a violent confrontation; Montag runs from the new-world city to join a band of wanderers who have memorized books in order to keep centuries of knowledge safe and available for future generations.

Themes: Life is meaningless in a controlled society in which everyone is alike and imagination is repressed. Technology can isolate people and inhibit the sharing of thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Without knowledge, a civilization dies or kills itself.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no problems for students reading at or even below grade level. There is some violence in the novel, because the action takes place in a violent society. However, descriptions are brief and provide appropriate evidence of a society in decline. There are three or four instances of language that might be offensive. Despite this gritty realism, the novel ends on a hopeful note. The hero lives and looks forward to taking part in creating a better world. Students will find themselves caught up in an adventure—a high-tech drama that both entertains and horrifies.

BACKGROUND

The Novel's Title. Ray Bradbury wrote a 25,000-word novella entitled "The Fireman," which he later expanded into this 50,000-word novel. He decided to give the novel a new title and, focusing on book burning, came up with the idea of using the temperature at which book paper burns. He called the physics and chemistry departments at several universities, but no one could pinpoint this temperature. Then, wondering why he hadn't thought of it first, he called the local fire station. The fire chief named the temperature, and Ray Bradbury had his title: *Fahrenheit 451.*

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Guy Montag, a thirty-year-old fireman whose job is to start fires and burn books; sensitive, thinks for himself, begins to question the state of his society.

Clarisse McClellan, Montag's neighbor, a delicate seventeen-year-old girl, pale with lively dark eyes; a gentle and curious misfit who likes to think, talk, watch people; Montag finds her disturbing and intriguing.

Mildred Montag, Guy's wife of ten years, thirty years old, diet-thin, with brittle hair and glazed eyes; constantly watching TV and listening to mini-radios plugged in her ears.

Captain Beatty, captain of the firemen; sooty hair and eyebrows, fiery face, bluish cheeks; a powerful supporter of the new society and enforcer of its rules.

Professor Faber, a former English professor who has been out of work for forty years, ever since liberal arts colleges were closed; white-haired, pale, fragile.

The hobos, five old men who have memorized books and escaped to the countryside. They include a former clergyman (Reverend Padover), an author of a book on the individual and society (Granger), a former Cambridge University professor (Fred Clement), a former U.C.L.A. professor (Dr. Simmons), and a former Columbia University professor (Professor West).

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Plot

In **Part One** we follow the thoughts and actions of the **protagonist,** Montag, at home and at work as he begins to ask himself the questions about his life that will form the **conflict** of the novel. The **setting** is the unspecified future, when firemen like Montag start rather than stop fires—when books are meant to be burned, along with the houses they are found in. At first Montag is a man taking great delight in burning, a man who enjoys his work and accepts the rules of his world. But on his way home one evening, he meets a young neighbor, Clarisse. Her talk about the days when firemen used to stop fires, and her curiosity about the past and the meaning of happiness, dismay and alarm him.

Montag arrives at his cold, sterile home to find his wife, Mildred, sleeping with a miniature radio in each ear. Finding an empty pill bottle, he realizes that Mildred has overdosed. He calls the emergency hospital, and two unsympathetic machine operators pump her stomach, drain her blood, and replace it. Sitting alone, Montag hears laughter and conversation coming from Clarisse's house next door. He steps outside to listen and realizes for the first time that he is not happy.

At the firehouse, Montag is wary of the firemen's "pet," a Mechanical Hound equipped with a needle-nose that can inject deadly chemicals. Recently, the Hound has acted angrily toward him—and Montag fears that someone has programmed the Hound to go after him. This scene **foreshadows** trouble to come.

For several days, Clarisse walks Montag to the subway, asking questions and sharing her observations. These conversations make Montag nervous and confused. Then one day Clarisse is gone, and Montag realizes he misses her.

Later, someone calls the firehouse to report that there are books in the attic of a neighboring house. The firemen find a woman in the house. She will not leave. Laughing, the men ignite mounds of books, pump kerosene into the rooms, and burn down the house—along with the woman. Witnessing the woman's death and her choice to burn with her books is a **turning point** for Montag. He hides one of her books under his arm.

At home that night, Montag learns that Clarisse is probably dead and that the family has moved. The next morning, Montag thinks about the woman who was burned, and he becomes sick with grief and repugnance. He wants to quit his job. His superior, Captain Beatty, comes to see Montag and lectures him on the history of their profession and the importance of burning books to ensure that everyone will be alike. Intellectuals and readers of books, he explains, were hated because they were different. Moreover, Beatty knows that Montag has a book; he tells him he can keep it for twenty-four hours, after which he must burn it. This incident signals Montag's **conflict** with Beatty.

After Beatty leaves, Montag defiantly collects some twenty books he has hidden in the air-conditioning system, stops Mildred from tossing them into the incinerator, and begins to read.

Part Two signals further changes in the protagonist as he begins to act on his new ideas. At home he tries to read to Mildred, but she prefers the noise and color of TV. He remembers meeting a retired English professor, Faber, who talked about the *meaning* of things. He calls Professor Faber and asks how many copies of the Bible are left. Montag discovers that the copy he has hidden may be one of the last few in the world. When he finds that he is unable to read and understand it, Montag goes to Faber's house, where the professor reluctantly agrees to teach him to understand what he reads. Faber also confesses that he did nothing early on to stop the burning of books. Finally, the professor shows Montag a miniature ear radio, a "green bullet," that he has designed. Those who wear these radios can listen and talk to one another. After giving Montag a green bullet, Faber offers to help his new ally deal with Beatty.

As Montag walks home from the subway, he hears that the country is mobilizing for yet another war. At home he finds Mildred watching TV with her friends. Montag suggests they talk instead. Appalled by their shallowness, he reacts by reading poetry to them. Mildred, in turn, calls him a fool.

Hour after hour, Faber talks to Montag on the bullet radio, encouraging him not to be afraid of learning, of making mistakes. Through the bullet, he is with Montag at home, on the subway, at the firehouse. Montag, nervous, returns a book to Beatty. Beatty tells him about a dream he had in which he and Montag debate about the value of books, and Beatty wins all the arguments, proving that books can't be trusted. Montag feels sick and confused. **Suspense** builds as the station alarm rings and the Mechanical Hound is found to be missing from the firehouse. Beatty says that there is no need to hurry in answering the alarm, that this one is a special case. The special case turns out to be Montag's house.

In **Part Three,** Montag takes the final steps that **resolve** the conflicts in the novel. When he arrives at his house, he sees Mildred, clutching a suitcase, speed off in a waiting taxi. It was she who turned him in. Beatty now orders Montag to burn down his own house—and to do it slowly by using the flame thrower. Faber, still in Montag's ear, tells him to run, but Montag is afraid of the Hound. After setting his own house on fire, he's arrested by Beatty. Suddenly Beatty strikes Montag and the ear radio falls out. Beatty picks it up and threatens to trace the radio. Montag screams "No," aims the flame thrower, and liquefies the Captain. Then the Hound appears and stabs Montag in the leg; Montag, in turn, destroys the metal dog.

Police sirens wail. The pain in his leg is excruciating, but Montag stumbles into an alley. He remembers the books hidden in his yard and goes back to find them. He finds four books and, after holding them, summons the strength to get away. Montag's decision to go back for the books and to run is an important **turning point** for him.

With great effort, Montag makes it to a gas station and washes up in the men's room. There he hears a radio announcement that war has been declared.

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After a painful flight and a near accident, Montag finally reaches Faber's door. Faber advises Montag to escape into the countryside and go to the hobo camps. After turning on Faber's tiny TV, they hear that the police are hunting for Guy Montag, using the Mechanical Hound to help with the search. Montag, preparing to leave, asks Faber for some dirty old clothes and tells the professor to get rid of his—Montag's—scent in the house. Then he runs.

The chase is on. Montag is running, running from the Mechanical Hound, running to the river. The police order all people to open their doors and look for Guy Montag. Fortunately, Montag makes it to the river, changes into Faber's clothes, and floats downstream. When the Hound reaches the river, Montag is gone.

The river carries him to shore, where he is engulfed by comforting country smells. Finding a rusty railroad track, Montag follows it, sensing that Clarisse once walked there. In time, he comes upon a group of men—the hobos—warming their hands before a fire. They welcome him. They explain that they know who he is from TV. One of the men switches on their battery TV, and they see what the police are up to. Because they can't admit that Montag escaped, the police have the Mechanical Hound attack an innocent pedestrian, declare the man is Montag, and announce that he's dead.

Montag is introduced to the men: a clergyman (Reverend Padover), an author (Granger), and three professors (Fred Clement, Dr. Simmons, and Professor West). They and thousands of others have each memorized a great book. He's invited to join them—if he has something to offer. Montag offers the Book of Ecclesiastes.

There is a thunder of jets; bombs strike, and in seconds the war is over. The city is gone. Yet the novel ends with hope. Those who have memorized books live on. They will be careful and will pass on the books by word of mouth. They will wait until people are ready to listen. Montag has become one of them.

Approaches for Post-Reading Activities

Because the **conflicts** in this novel are struggles of an individual against a whole society, the book might be discussed in a social studies or history course that focuses on sociology or systems of government. Although fictional, the repressive civilization depicted is quite believable. The following activities can be explored in cooperative groups or by students working independently on research projects.

1. Technology Today

A major **theme** of *Fahrenheit 451* is that technology can isolate people and inhibit the sharing of thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Students working in groups could make a list of the current technology that is part of everyday life, such as videocassette recorders, computers, answering machines, mobile phones, and portable tape players with headphones. They could discuss the impact of each invention on society and report on their conclusions to the class.

- How has the invention changed interpersonal relationships?
- What has the invention replaced? For better or for worse?
- Why do we need to learn to control technology? How might we start?

2. Joining the Wanderers

Have students imagine they have joined the wandering group of book lovers. What great book has each student committed to memory? Have students discuss their selections and defend their choices in terms of the book's meaning and the contribution it can make to a better world.

3. Comparing and Contrasting Novel and Film

Students interested in film could watch François Truffaut's film version of *Fahrenheit 451* (1967). They should compare the film's interpretation of the story with Bradbury's, focusing on the following elements:

- **setting**—futuristic aspects, mood
- **characters**—appearance, personalities, values
- **action**—level of violence, use of suspense

4. Could It Happen? Relating the Novel to Real Life

For many readers, this novel brings to mind the book burning that took place in Nazi Germany. Students could present a panel discussion on why the Nazis burned books and what this suggests about the power of the word. Do book burnings still take place around the world today? Ask students to consider issues of censorship. When is it necessary? What are its effects? Who has the right to act as censor?

Meet the Writer

Ray Bradbury (1920–) began writing when he was seven years old. He was born in Waukegan, Illinois, and lived, he says, immersed in a world of fantasy and illusion—the world of the comic strip characters Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. In high school, he founded and edited a magazine called *Futuria Fantasia,* which he ran off on a mimeograph. After graduating from high school, Bradbury wrote stories that didn't sell and supported himself by selling newspapers in downtown Los Angeles. At the age of twenty-three, he became a full-time writer.

Bradbury explains that his hatred of thought investigation and thought control of any kind arises from the fact that his ancestor, Mary Bradbury, was tried as a witch in Salem, Massachusetts, during the seventeenth century. According to Bradbury, "Science fiction is a wonderful hammer; I intend to use it when and if necessary to bark a few shins or knock a few heads, in order to make people leave people alone."

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Read On

Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine.* A literary classic about boyhood, this novel is both imaginative and realistic. Douglas Spaulding, twelve years old, experiences a summer of wonder and wisdom as he moves on from childhood. It is 1928 in Green Town, Illinois, and Douglas suddenly realizes it's great to be alive. He embraces the ordinary and the extraordinary: trolley cars, rain barrels, dandelion wine, the Happiness Machine, and the Time Machine.

Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron." The future again—but this time everyone must by law be "equal" or the same. This short story uses satire and humor to show one person fighting back.

Tom Godwin, "The Cold Equations." A suspenseful short story, set in a technological future, about a hard decision and its dreadful consequences.

Ray Bradbury, "The Pedestrian." Set in an ominous future, this short story leaves the reader wondering about the uses of technology.

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Pit and the Pendulum." An extraordinary tale of horror set in another totalitarian society.

Sophocles, *Antigone.* A play from ancient Greece that explores the individual conscience at odds with established authority.

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail." A powerful letter written by the American civil rights leader from his prison cell in 1963.

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