

Ray Bradbury Wrote 'Fahrenheit 451' to Prevent a Dystopia. Instead, He Predicted One

Sitting in the basement typing room of UCLA in 1950, Ray Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451* in nine days. The school charged ten cents every half hour to use one of its typewriters, and Bradbury spent a total of \$9.80 to complete the book. Its [publication](#) launched the struggling writer to prominence and secured his place in the pantheon of science fiction literature. Now, nearly seventy years after Bradbury emerged from the basement with his manuscript, HBO is [adapting](#) the book for television, with Michael B. Jordan cast as the main character Montag. The film's producers must recognize the novel's relevance to today's cultural climate. Indeed, when reflecting on the themes of the book, one cannot help but marvel at its prescience.

What distinguishes *Fahrenheit 451* from other dystopian fiction is that it's less about censorship than it is about self-censorship. Bradbury imagines a future in which technology has lulled people into complacency with mindless entertainment and a barrage of endless trivia. As a result, citizens have become sheltered from the realities of life and desire only to perpetuate an anodyne existence of pleasure and comfort. They have developed an intolerance for unpleasant truths, politically incorrect ideas, and opinions that might knock them out of their safe-spaces. Hence the burning of books, those containers of ideas from thinkers from the past that preserve and perpetuate a free and liberal society. As Professor Faber explains to Montag: "Do you understand now why books are hated and feared? Because they reveal the pores on the face of life. The comfortable people want only the faces

of the full moon, wax, faces without pores, hairless, expressionless.”

No one wants to be made uncomfortable, no one wants their beliefs challenged. To be exposed to diverse opinions would demand considered thought and might upset a life of naïve pleasantness. Such a possibility provokes resentment from an immature mind, and resentment often leads to self-righteous destruction. Look at the first line of the novel: *“It was a pleasure to burn.”* Why a pleasure? Because maintaining a false sense of moral superiority by silencing people who disagree with you is one of the perversities of human nature, something that a liberal education is designed to remedy. Intellectual development is always a struggle, and the search for truth never ends; it requires continuous exchange and debate. Captain Beatty, the fire chief, knows this full well. He observes, “If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war.”

Beyond the philosophical concern for truth, what else is at stake in the silencing of ideas is the concept of human dignity, the bedrock principle of the West. Human dignity implies that each person is a unique individual, worthy of our respect for that reason alone. Each person has a right to his own mind, and has the freedom of speech to express himself civilly without fear of retaliation. For some, however, diversity is dangerous. Bradbury understood this profoundly and expresses it through Beatty’s central monologue:

You always dread the unfamiliar. Surely you remember the boy in your own school class who was exceptionally ‘bright’...wasn’t it this bright boy you selected for beatings and tortures after hours? Of course it was. We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make

them cower, to judge themselves against. So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it.

Ray Bradbury often said that he wrote science fiction not to predict the future but to prevent it. On this score, *Fahrenheit 451* seems to have failed. The free speech wars on college campuses, the siloing effect of technology, the intolerance of diverse political opinions, and the virtual cocoon provided by perpetual entertainment all suggest that Bradbury anticipated the future with an accuracy unparalleled elsewhere in science fiction literature.

It's a strange irony that, in the age of the Internet, which was supposed to encourage more transparency and debate, the open exchange of ideas is under threat. This was pointed out by another famous science fiction writer, Michael Crichton. "In the information society," says Ian Malcolm in *Jurassic Park*, "No one thinks. We expected to banish paper, but we actually banished thought." Bradbury saw this coming many decades earlier, and he understood why. Exposure to new ideas is uncomfortable and potentially dangerous. Staying safe, comfortable, and equal requires that everyone think identically. Liberal learning, the crucible that forms the individual, is anathema to group identity and cannot be tolerated. If you disagree, you're morally suspect.

Which is why we need Bradbury's message today more than ever. In a coda to the 1979 printing of *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury wrote: "There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches."

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