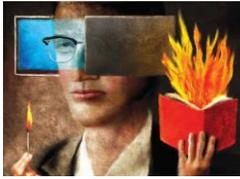


# Sam Weller: Ray Bradbury's 180 on Fahrenheit 451

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In October 1953, a 33-year-old Los Angeles writer named Ray Bradbury published his first novel, *Fahrenheit 451*. Today, the book is a mainstay of school curriculums, translated into 35 languages, canonized alongside other dystopian classics such as Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. In 2011, the e-book rights to *Fahrenheit 451* sold, according to Bradbury's agent, Michael Congdon, in the "high seven figures."

*Fahrenheit 451* is the story of a near-future society where books are banned. Firemen go house to house, ferreting out literary contraband and burning it. Books are dangerous, as the novel goes. They promote ideas and thought — and in philosophy comes melancholy. Yet despite books' illegal status, an underground resistance of readers continues to covet them. One day, Guy Montag, a 30-year-old fireman, decides to bring a book home with him to discover what all the fuss is about.

Bradbury wrote his 50,000-word novel in just nine days on a rented typewriter in the basement of the Powell Library on the campus of the University of California, Los Angeles. Alongside a dozen college students working on term papers and essays, Bradbury fed dimes into a small timer and, for a mere \$9.80, wrote a book that has long been hailed as one of the great works of anti-censorship.

But in 2007, Bradbury ignited his own fire, insisting that *Fahrenheit 451* was not really about censorship or Big Brother at all but rather a novel intended as a searing indictment of the looming cultural distraction of technology, most notably television. In Bradbury's fictional society, citizens — even Montag's wife, Mildred — surround themselves with wall-size televisions as a form of mindless escape.

Despite the book's heavy warning on the overuse of television, *Fahrenheit 451* has been widely interpreted over the decades as an indictment of communist witch hunt-era America. Sen. Joseph McCarthy's red-scare investigation had reached its apex at the very time that Bradbury was writing his book.

Still, in 2007, Bradbury vehemently denied that he was satirically commenting on McCarthy or government censorship. Instead, he insisted, the book was written at the dawn of the television age and was a cautionary tale of how society could well reach to TV as a sort of opiate. *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury said, was a depiction of a society willfully dumbing itself down by staring at screens, stuffing its collective consciousness with useless factoids, empty ideas and throwaway reality.

Bradbury forewarned us all of the coming dawn of the 70-inch flat-screen culture we inhabit today.

Some readers were disappointed by Bradbury's 2007 comments. Internet message boards crackled with spirited debates on the meaning of the novel. In the midst of the post-9/11 era, as debate over wire-tapping and the Patriot Act ensued, many had turned to *Fahrenheit 451* as parable of Big Brother gone too far.

Were they wrong?

I worked with Bradbury for 12 years as his authorized biographer. I wrote two books along the way, *The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury* and *Listen to the Echoes: The Ray Bradbury Interviews*. Last summer, with Mort Castle, I co-edited *Shadow Show: All-New Stories in Celebration of Ray Bradbury*.

I spent hundreds and hundreds of hours in conversation with the man. We talked at his home into the small hours on many an occasion. I drove him across Los Angeles countless days — time-traveling sojourns down his memory lane. Bradbury grew up near Hollywood during its golden era and loved to revisit memories with me. We spoke at length about his love of books, reading and libraries.

Bradbury dedicated the 2003 collection *Bradbury Stories: 100 of Bradbury's Most Celebrated Tales*, in part, to me. I went to the White House with him in 2004 when he was given the Medal of Arts.

Because of this singular, decidedly complex relationship between biographer and subject, people often inquire about my opinions of *Fahrenheit 451* and its themes. Did Bradbury really mean it when he said his book was not about censorship? Could this great book, so long placed in the pantheon of anti-censorship literature, not be about censorship at all?

As I stated in my first biography, Bradbury was a “mass of contradictions.” Here was a man who, with uncanny prescience, predicted flat-screen televisions, 24-hour banking machines, teen violence, the demise of literary reading, and the rising significance of technology in our day-to-day lives. Because of this, he has been hailed as a sort of technological soothsayer. Yet Bradbury never once drove an automobile himself. He didn’t fly on an airplane until he was 62. He never owned a computer, and he deemed the Internet a towering confluence of mostly inane chatter.

Another example of his contradictory nature: Bradbury insisted to me that an older writer should never go back and rewrite his earlier published work. “A writer must not tamper with his younger self,” he told me often. Yet his canon is peppered with revised versions of stories, altered tales rewritten at various stages of his career to better suit connected story cycles.

In 1950, Bradbury wrote his first television script, beginning a long and successful run of writing for the new and burgeoning medium (including eight scripts for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and three for *The Twilight Zone*).

When I asked Bradbury about the apparent hypocrisy of writing for television while lambasting it at the same time in the pages of his best-known work, he brushed off my question with a wave of his hand and a hearty chuckle, stating, “I never said I was against all television. I am just against bad television!”

*Fahrenheit 451* is, without question, a book about the overreliance on technology in an increasingly pixelated society. Even in his letters dating to the early 1950s, when the idea for *Fahrenheit 451* was germinating, Bradbury wrote of his concerns about the role television and even dramatic radio were playing in cultivating short attention spans. *Fahrenheit 451* is a story that forewarned us all of the perils of a multitasking, ADHD-addled world where the written work is condensed to bullet points, punch lines and charticles.

In Bradbury’s fictional universe, Big Brother is less instrumental in the censorship of books than the citizens themselves who no longer care about the joy of reading. They are too distracted by technology.

“*Fahrenheit 451* is less about Big Brother and more about Little Sister,” he told me.

Still, Bradbury’s 2007 comments, that *Fahrenheit 451* is not about censorship, are off base, another example of his contradictory nature. I make this claim with all due reverence and respect to the man and his body of work — a man who, as the father of four daughters, once told me I was “the son he never had.”

In fact, when he made his controversial comments in 2007, I told him I respectfully disagreed.

Who was I to disagree with him? After all, he wrote the book long before I had even entered the world. But as Bradbury’s biographer, I was well acquainted with his proclivity to contradict himself and his penchant for subtle revisionist history. More than one of Bradbury’s stories morphed over the years, taking on new life, becoming mythical versions of his own reality.

*Fahrenheit 451* is, for certain, a book that squarely addresses the proliferation of mass media in America. But it is simultaneously a novel that took on Bradbury’s waxing disdain, at that time, for censorship, book burnings and witch hunts.

Even in a later introduction to *Fahrenheit 451*, published in 1966, Bradbury wrote about the influence of Hitler’s and Stalin’s book burnings, and his growing anger over the House Un-American Activities Committee and its inquisition into communists in Hollywood in 1946.

Bradbury’s letters at the time he wrote *Fahrenheit 451*, even an article he wrote for *The Nation* on May 2, 1953, clearly show that censorship was at the forefront of his mind when he wrote his classic novel. In the *Nation* essay, Bradbury questioned “whether or not my ideas on censorship via the fire department [in an early version of *Fahrenheit 451*] will be old hat this time next week. ... When the wind is right, a faint odor of kerosene is exhaled from Senator McCarthy.”

Ray Bradbury was right. *Fahrenheit 451* was a book about the growing threat of mass media and technology in our world. And while Big Brother is relegated to the shadows in his book, there is no mistaking the novel is also very much concerned with the theme of censorship in our society.