

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Fahrenheit 451

by

Ray Bradbury

Book Information

Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451

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Book Level: 5.2

Interest Level: UG

In this futuristic novel, the main character struggles with excessive controls on individual liberty, especially the banning and burning of books.

Topics: Community Life, Censorship; Community Life, Ethics/Morality; Community Life, Freedoms; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; Science Fiction, Future

Main Characters

Captain Beatty head of the firemen

Clarisse McClellan an idealistic teenage girl who is the catalyst for Montag's change

Faber a former English professor who helps Montag

Granger a philosophical hobo whom Montag meets near the end of the book

Guy Montag a book-burning fireman who changes his thinking and his ways

Mildred Montag Guy's TV-obsessed wife

Vocabulary

cacophony harsh noise

insidious seeking to attain one's ends by devious means; tricky or cunning

pedant one who is too concerned with, or shows off, his learning

perfunctorily done merely as a duty

proclivities an attraction to a particular activity

stolid having or showing little or no emotion

This futuristic story starts with the narrator describing what a pleasure it is to see things burn. We then meet Guy Montag, who is a professional burner of books. On his way home, he meets Clarisse. She is an intelligent girl who poses many questions to him. She speaks of a time when houses were not fireproof and when firemen put fires out instead of setting them. He returns home to a wife, who has taken too many pills.

Meanwhile, Montag continues to run into Clarisse, feeling closer and closer to her as she talks freely about her thoughts and ideas. She speaks of a time when the world was less hectic and people took time to think and express themselves. The Mechanical Hound is soon introduced as a stealthy predator, not quite alive and not quite dead. Its nose is incredibly sensitive, and it is used to track down, detain, or stop the criminals who read and harbor books.

One day, Montag walks home, waiting for Clarisse to join him, but she does not. She is never seen by Montag again. One night at the firehouse, Montag voices his concern over his job to his captain, Beatty. A traumatic moment for Montag soon follows when they answer a call at a book-harboring suspect's home. It is an elderly woman with a large library. She refuses to leave her home and actually instigates the burning herself. She perishes in the fire, and Montag is grief-stricken. When Montag returns home, however, it is revealed that he took a book from her home. He hides it under his pillow. Later, Mildred reveals that she thinks Clarisse is dead. Outside Montag's house, the Hound stirs.

Montag is by now so disgusted with book burning that he cannot go into work. He asks his wife to call Captain Beatty and tell him that he is sick. Mildred worries that he will never again return to work. Soon after, Captain Beatty shows up at the door. He reveals that sooner or later, this "sickness" happens to everyone. Montag asks him when the fireman profession started, and Beatty reveals that it was during the Civil War. He then goes into a long discourse about the causes of the book burning; mainly, it allows all people to be equal and happy. He asserts that books make people unhappy for

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several different reasons. He reasons that, since books cannot please everyone, there should be no books. He makes it clear that it had nothing to do with the government; it was simply what the people wanted. Montag is then told that he may peruse a book for twenty-four hours, and then return it.

Later, Montag takes out a hidden stash of books, which he devours with Mildred by his side. He is determined to find Faber, a former English professor. Montag takes him a copy of the Bible and attains his help in stopping the firemen. Faber gives Montag a communications device for his ear, and plans to help him stop Beatty.

When Montag returns to work, Beatty attempts to trap him. Montag is careful not to reveal himself. Then, an alarm comes in, and Beatty and Montag are off. Soon, they arrive at Montag's house. Beatty orders Montag to burn his own home, and Montag obeys, with pleasure. He feels good as he watches his home burn. After the deed, he kills Beatty, which he soon regrets. This, needless to say, makes him a fugitive. The Hound is soon after him, and he returns one last time to Faber for help. Faber gives him some of his clothes and some liquor. He tells him to look for a hobo community near the railroad tracks. Montag manages to outwit the Hound, and he finds his way to the hobos, who are a group of book-loving individuals -- each person has memorized certain books verbatim. Law enforcement, however, is not content to let their fugitive escape. For the sake of satisfying their television audience, they have the Hound kill an innocent man. War comes, and Montag's group is determined to return to the city.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why was Montag unhappy?

He had been living an unfulfilling life. He did not connect emotionally with his wife. All of this time, he had just been going through the motions, never taking time to notice anything or question the authority of those around him. He had also spent many years destroying what may be mankind's only salvation--books.

Literary Analysis

In what ways can you tell that this story takes place in the future?

There are several instances in which a character mentions how things were in the past. Also, there is mention of winning an atomic war during the 1990s. Furthermore, the concept of mechanically programmed hounds is quite futuristic as well.

Inferential Comprehension

Which character is your favorite? Why?

Montag would be a reasonable choice because he stood up for what was right. He made a change, and he had the courage to do something about the wrongs he saw in society. Clarisse would also be a contender because it was she who brought about the change in Montag. Had he never met her, he may never have changed.

Constructing Meaning

What do you think will happen to Mildred now that she has left Montag?

If she survives the bombing of the city, there is no reason to believe she will do anything but continue living the way she has. She will probably find another television wall somewhere and absorb herself in the lives of others. She has learned nothing from this ordeal and is a very stagnant character.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The old

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woman in the story screamed "Master Ridley." Beatty informed Montag that Nicholas Ridley and Latimer were burned alive for heresy in 1555. Before their deaths, they said, "We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out." It is appropriate that Bradbury would use this in his book, which is a protest against anything that represses freedom. Coincidentally, there were three Puritan men who were cut and branded in England in 1637 for rebelling against the Anglican church: Prynne, Bastwick, and Burton. Before their deaths, they called the clergy "wolfish" and accused them of preying on their flock instead of nourishing them. They, too, vowed that God would extract his vengeance on England. The master poet John Milton witnessed this terrible event. In fact, he paid tribute to them in his poem "Lycidas." He even paraphrased their exact words. For a project, have students research Latimer and Ridley and how their influence is apparent in Bradbury's work. Then, have them research Prynne, Bastwick, and Burton. How is their influence evident in Milton's "Lycidas"? How are "Lycidas" and *Fahrenheit 451* similar? How are they different?

Understanding the Author's Craft In this story, fire symbolizes several things: ignorance, control, destruction, and even re-birth. Have students write a short poem using one particular symbol. Have students read their poems aloud in class and see if the class can guess what their symbols represent.

Making Predictions In *Fahrenheit 451*, we have only Mildred's information that Clarisse is dead -- we never know for certain what happened to her. In the afterword, Bradbury admits that, in the stage production of his book, he kept Clarisse alive and living with the hobos. For a project, have students write a short story or essay about what they believe happened to Clarisse. Are there any passages that might suggest that she is still alive? How would the book have been different if she was present throughout its entirety?

Comparing and Contrasting When Montag read

a poem aloud to the neighbor ladies, he read the last two stanzas of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." This poem was written by Arnold as an expression of religious despair in society. It is interesting that Bradbury chose the last two stanzas, because they express hope: since society has lost faith, let us have faith in each other. For a project, have students read "Dover Beach" and write an essay. Topics might include: why Bradbury chose this particular poem, why Bradbury chose the last two stanzas and how that choice was significant to his story, or how the poem and story are alike and how they are different.