Ray Bradbury

AMERICAN WRITER

WRITTEN BY: Erik Gregersen (Encyclopedia Britannica online)

Ray Bradbury, in full Ray Douglas Bradbury, (born August 22, 1920, [Waukegan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Waukegan), [Illinois](https://www.britannica.com/place/Illinois-state), U.S.—died June 5, 2012, [Los Angeles](https://www.britannica.com/place/Los-Angeles-California), [California](https://www.britannica.com/place/California-state)), American author best known for his highly imaginative short stories and novels that blend a poetic style, [nostalgia](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia) for childhood, social [criticism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criticism), and an awareness of the hazards of runaway technology.

**Early Life**

As a child, Bradbury loved [horror films](https://www.britannica.com/art/horror-film) such as [*The Phantom of the Opera*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Phantom-of-the-Opera-film-1925) (1925); the books of [L. Frank Baum](https://www.britannica.com/biography/L-Frank-Baum) and [Edgar Rice Burroughs](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edgar-Rice-Burroughs), and the first [science fiction](https://www.britannica.com/art/science-fiction) magazine, *Amazing Stories*. Bradbury often told of an encounter with a [carnival](https://www.britannica.com/art/carnival-theatrical-entertainment) magician, Mr. Electrico, in 1932 as a notable influence. Wreathed in static electricity, Mr. Electrico touched the young Bradbury on the nose and said, “Live forever!” The next day, Bradbury returned to the carnival to ask Mr. Electrico’s advice on a [magic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/magic-supernatural-phenomenon) trick. After Mr. Electrico introduced him to the other performers in the carnival, he told Bradbury that he was a [reincarnation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/reincarnation) of his best friend who died in [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I). Bradbury later wrote, “a few days later I began to write, full-time. I have written every single day of my life since that day.”

**First Short Stories**

Bradbury’s family moved to Los Angeles in 1934. In 1937 Bradbury joined the Los Angeles Science Fiction League, where he received encouragement from young writers such as Henry Kuttner, Edmond Hamilton, [Robert Heinlein](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-A-Heinlein), and Leigh Brackett, who met weekly with him. Bradbury published his first [short story](https://www.britannica.com/art/short-story), “Hollerbochen’s Dilemma” (1938), in the league’s “fanzine,” *Imagination!* He published his own fanzine, *Futuria Fantasia*, in 1939. That same year Bradbury traveled to the first World Science Fiction convention, in [New York City](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-York-City), where he met many of the genre’s editors. He made his first sale to a professional science fiction magazine in 1941, when his short story “Pendulum” (written with Henry Hasse) was published in *Super Science Stories*. Many of Bradbury’s earliest stories, with their elements of [fantasy](https://www.britannica.com/art/fantasy-narrative-genre) and horror, were published in *Weird Tales*. Most of these stories were collected in his first book of short stories, *Dark Carnival* (1947). Bradbury’s style, with its rich use of [metaphors](https://www.britannica.com/art/metaphor) and [similes](https://www.britannica.com/art/simile), stood out from the more utilitarian work that dominated pulp magazine writing.

In the mid-1940s Bradbury’s stories started to appear in major [magazines](https://www.britannica.com/topic/magazine-publishing) such as *The American Mercury*, [*Harper’s*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Harpers-Magazine), and *McCall’s*, and he was unusual in publishing both in pulp magazines such as *Planet Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and “slicks” (so-called because of their high-quality paper) such as [*The New Yorker*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-New-Yorker) and *Collier’s* without leaving behind the [genres](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genres) he loved. *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), a series of short stories, depicts [Earth’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Earth) colonization of [Mars](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mars-planet), which leads to the extinction of an [idyllic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/idyllic) Martian civilization. However, in the face of an oncoming nuclear war, many of the settlers return to Earth, and after Earth’s destruction, a few surviving humans return to Mars to become the new Martians. The short-story collection *The Illustrated Man* (1951) included one of his most famous stories, “The Veldt,” in which a mother and father are concerned about the effect their house’s simulation of [lions](https://www.britannica.com/animal/lion) on the African [veldt](https://www.britannica.com/science/veld) is having on their children.

**Fahrenheit 451, Dandelion Wine, and Scripts**

Bradbury’s next [novel](https://www.britannica.com/art/novel), [*Fahrenheit 451*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fahrenheit-451-novel-by-Bradbury) (1953), is regarded as his greatest work. In a future society where books are forbidden, Guy Montag, a “fireman” whose job is the burning of books, takes a book and is seduced by reading. *Fahrenheit 451* has been acclaimed for its anti-[censorship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/censorship) themes and its defense of [literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature) against the encroachment of electronic media. An acclaimed [film adaptation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fahrenheit-451-film-by-Truffaut) was released in 1966.

[...] In 1954 Bradbury spent six months in Ireland with director [John Huston](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Huston) working on the screenplay for the film *Moby Dick* (1956), an experience Bradbury later fictionalized in his novel *Green Shadows, White Whale* (1992). After the release of *Moby Dick*, Bradbury was in demand as a screenwriter in Hollywood and wrote scripts for *Playhouse 90*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and *The Twilight Zone*.

One of Bradbury’s most personal works, *Dandelion Wine* (1957), is an autobiographical novel about a magical but too brief summer of a 12-year-old boy in Green Town, Illinois (a fictionalized version of his childhood home of Waukegan). His next collection, *A Medicine for Melancholy* (1959), contained “All Summer in a Day,” a [poignant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/poignant) story of childhood cruelty on [Venus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Venus-planet), where the Sun comes out only every seven years. The Midwest of his childhood was once again the setting of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), in which a carnival comes to town run by the mysterious and evil Mr. Dark. The next year, he published his first collection of short plays, *The Anthem Sprinters and Other Antics*.

**Later Work And Awards**

In the 1970s Bradbury no longer wrote short fiction at his previous pace, turning his energy to [poetry](https://www.britannica.com/art/poetry) and [drama](https://www.britannica.com/place/Drama-Greece). Earlier in his career he had sold several [mystery](https://www.britannica.com/art/mystery-story) short stories, and he returned to the [genre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genre) with *Death Is a Lonely Business* (1985), an homage to the detective stories of writers such as [Raymond Chandler](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Raymond-Chandler) and [Dashiell Hammett](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dashiell-Hammett) mixed with an autobiographical setting of 1949 Venice, California, where Bradbury lived at the time. Two sequels, *A Graveyard for Lunatics* (1990) and Let’s *All Kill Constance* (2002), mined his experiences in 1950s and ’60s Hollywood. His final novel, *Farewell Summer* (2006), was a sequel to *Dandelion Wine*. He adapted 59 of his short stories for the television series *The Ray Bradbury Theatre* (1985–92).

Bradbury was often considered a science fiction author, but he said that his only science fiction book was *Fahrenheit 451*. Strictly speaking, much of his work was fantasy, horror, or mysteries. He said, “I use a scientific idea as a platform to leap into the air and never come back.” He received many honours for his work including an [Emmy](https://www.britannica.com/art/Emmy-Award) for his animated [adaptation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptation) of *The Halloween Tree* (1994) and the National Medal of Arts (2004). In 2007 the [Pulitzer Prize](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pulitzer-Prize) Board awarded Bradbury a Special Citation for his distinguished career.

*Fahrenheit 451*

*Fahrenheit 451* is a dystopian [novel](https://www.britannica.com/art/novel), first published in 1953, that is regarded as perhaps Ray Bradbury’s greatest work and has been praised for its stance against [censorship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/censorship) and its defense of [literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature) as necessary both to the humanity of individuals and to civilization.

The story takes place in an unspecified city in a distant future. The [protagonist](https://www.britannica.com/art/protagonist), Guy Montag, is a fireman whose job is to burn down houses in which books have been discovered. After leaving work one day, he meets Clarisse, a teenaged girl who enjoys nature and asks if he is happy. At home, he finds that his wife, Mildred, has swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills in a suicide attempt. After he calls for help, two men arrive and revive her. The next morning, she behaves as though nothing happened and watches as usual the programs on the television screens that make up three of the parlour walls. Montag and the cheerful Clarisse begin talking regularly, until one day she is not outside waiting for him; he eventually learns that she was killed by a speeding car. Later, when the firemen are sent to burn down the house of an elderly woman, Montag takes her [Bible](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bible)—an act that he thinks his hand has undertaken on its own—and the woman chooses to die with her books. Montag begins to have doubts about his mission, and the next day he stays home from work.

Firehouse leader Captain Beatty goes to Montag in order to convince him that the fireman’s job is important. He explains that people began to lose interest in reading after the advent of television and that objections to some passages in books by interest groups and minorities led to censorship. Eventually it was felt that books and learning in general created inequality and unhappiness, and so books were banned. After Beatty leaves, Montag reveals to Mildred that he has hidden several books in the house. They begin reading, but he finds the books hard to understand, and Mildred prefers TV.

Montag remembers that he has the phone number and address of a retired English professor, Faber. Thinking that he may have the last printed copy of the Bible, Montag heads to Faber’s home while trying to memorize passages from the work. Montag asks Faber to teach him to understand books, and Faber agrees. When Montag arrives home, Mildred is watching TV with two friends, one of whom announces that her husband has been drafted to fight in the current war. Montag attempts to engage the women in conversation about their lives and politics. When he begins reading aloud from a poetry collection, one of Mildred’s friends begins crying, while the other is angered, saying that this is why books are banned.

The next day at work, Montag and the other firemen go out on a call, and it turns out that it is Montag’s house that is to be burned down. Montag is informed that Mildred was the one who reported him, and she leaves in a taxi without talking to her husband. After Captain Beatty orders Montag to burn the house down, he obeys and then turns the flamethrower on Beatty, killing him. He flees to Faber’s home, and the retired professor tells him that he can escape by following railroad lines to the countryside. Montag evades the intensive manhunt and later encounters a group of men sitting around a bonfire. Their leader, Granger, tells him that each of them has memorized a book in hopes of using the knowledge to rebuild society. They then watch as bombs destroy the city. Afterward the men head back to the city to begin the task of starting civilization anew.

*Fahrenheit 451*’s arguments in favour of literature and critical thinking and against censorship and blind [conformity](https://www.britannica.com/topic/conformity) have continued to [resonate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resonate) since the book’s first appearance, and it has been adapted into films—including [Franƈois Truffaut](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francois-Truffaut)’s [1966 classic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fahrenheit-451-film-by-Truffaut)—plays, and a [graphic novel](https://www.britannica.com/art/graphic-novel). *Match to Flame: The Fictional Paths to Fahrenheit 451* (2006) is a collection of Bradbury’s earlier writings on similar themes, the most notable of which was the [novella](https://www.britannica.com/art/novella) “The Fireman,” published in 1951 in the magazine *Galaxy Science Fiction*.