**The Wonderful and Terrifying**

**Contradictions of Ray Bradbury**

**Or**

**How to Prevent the Future**

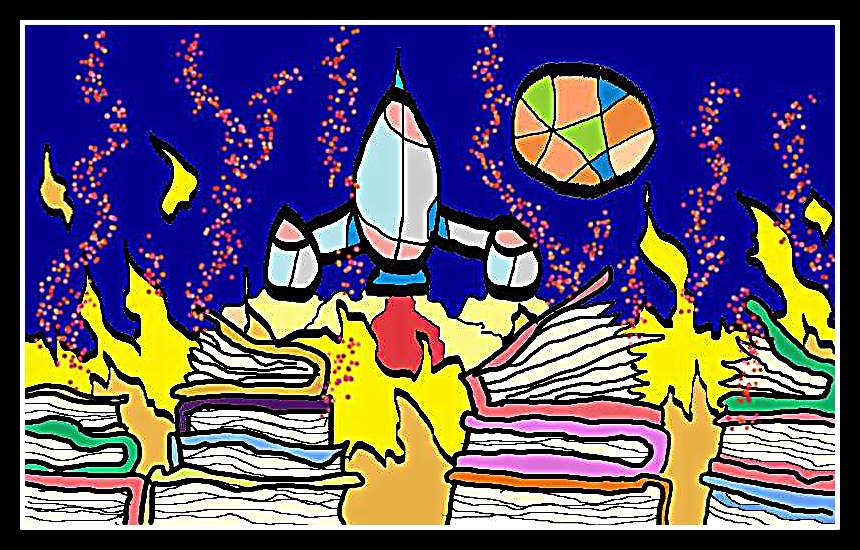
**By Celebrating It**.

**A Talk at Northern District Library, Toronto**

**By**

**Hugh A.D. Spencer**

**30.04.2013**



***With Illustrations by the Author***

**The Importance of Place**

I would like to start this talk with some anecdotes about Ray Bradbury and his best known work *Fahrenheit 451*, because I think they reveal something really valuable about his beliefs and why many of us treasure his stories so much.

Bradbury was once asked if he felt that *Fahrenheit 451* was an accurate prediction of the state of the world. He replied, “I’ve never believed in prediction. That's other people's business, someone like H.G. Wells …I've said it often: I've tried not to predict, but to protect and to prevent. If I can convince people to stop doing what they're doing and go to the library and be sensible, without pontificating and without being self-conscious, that's fine.”

He also tells us about what inspired the book:

Well, Hitler of course. When I was fifteen, he burnt the books in the streets of Berlin. Then along the way I learned about the libraries in Alexandria burning five thousand years ago. That grieved my soul. Since I'm self-educated, that means my educators—the libraries—are in danger. And if it could happen in Alexandria, if it could happen in Berlin, maybe it could happen somewhere up ahead...

And finally, Bradbury gives a wonderful account of the events that led to him writing *Fahrenheit 451:*

In 1950, our first baby was born, and in 1951, our second, so our house was getting full of children. It was very loud, it was very wonderful, but I had no money to rent an office. I was wandering around the UCLA library and discovered there was a typing room where you could rent a typewriter for ten cents a half-hour. So I went and got a bag of dimes. The novel began that day, and nine days later it was finished. But my God, what a place to write that book! I ran up and down stairs and grabbed books off the shelf to find any kind of quote and ran back down and put it in the novel. The book wrote itself in nine days, because the library told me to do it.

There is one common thing in all of these stories: Bradbury’s passionate awareness of the critical importance of libraries and books. Without books there can be no libraries and without libraries there can be no knowledge. Without books there can be no freedom.

A library is very appropriate, a very good place to talk about Ray Bradbury.



In fact, Ray Bradbury is something of a patron saint of libraries and *Fahrenheit 451* can be thought of as something of a cautionary bible. The concept of a future totalitarian state where firemen are burners of books rather than the savers of lives and property reflects what might be Bradbury’s most personal nightmare: A society that is incapable of art, that sees literature as its greatest enemy and employs science and technology as instruments to wipe out all creativity and imagination.

It is a bleak vision and you can understand why Bradbury said his goal of his art was to try and stop it. The threat of this dystopia recurs again and again in his stories – from the original novella “The Fireman” that grew into the full novel of *Fahrenheit 451*, to short stories such as “The Pedestrian”, “Long After Midnight”, “Usher II” and “Pillar of Fire”. In fact there’s a recent book called *A Pleasure to Burn* that collects many of Bradbury’s variations on this dystopia. It is a unique and fascinating read that shows you how a writer’s vision can grow.

Looking at these stories, it is not difficult to see how you could see Bradbury as a literary pessimist.

But there’s another side to Ray Bradbury.

He is also the writer of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* where the innocence and integrity of a library custodian’s son stops evil and stories like, “The Man” where the promise of religious salvation is extended to civilizations in other star systems and the one who invented the miraculous Electric Grandmother in “I Sing the Body Electric”.

Even in his dystopian stories, there’s a “gee whiz” enthusiasm for the near-magical properties of some of the future science and technology. The colonizing spacecraft in *The Martian Chronicles* are compared to beautiful and graceful “silver locusts”; there’s a fascination with the mechanisms of the robots in “Marionettes Inc.”; there’s an elegance in the weapons of Martians (they shoot deadly bees!); and even the most menacing element in *Fahrenheit 451*, the Mechanical Hound, gets a certain amount of loving detail:

The Hound growled.

Montag jumped back.

The Hound half rose in its kennel and looked at him with green-blue neon light flickering in its suddenly activated eye-bulbs. It growled again, a strange rasping combination of electrical sizzle, a frying sound, a scraping of metal, a turning of cogs that seemed rusty and ancient with suspicion.

“No, no, boy,” said Montag, his heart pounding.

He saw the silver needle extend upon the air an inch, pull back, extend, pull back. The growl simmered in the beast and it looked at him.

From this passage you can tell that Bradbury fears the Hound but he also loves the technological marvel of the Hound.

From this perspective, I grew up also seeing Bradbury as a writer who saw something wonderful and magical about what the future might offer. So in that sense, Bradbury is also an optimist. Whether he was an optimistic pessimist or a pessimistic optimist is a question we will return to.



**Mr. Science Fiction**

If we did an idea association game and asked every third person we met what word comes to mind when we say “science fiction”, it is likely you would hear the following:

* “Star Wars”
* “Star Trek”
* “Ray Bradbury”

These responses are interesting for a number of reasons:

* Bradbury is the only person who comes up.
* He is also the only writer mentioned.
* Even though Ray Bradbury’s work has been adapted into film, television, radio, even comic books and graphic novels – he is still best known for his written work.
* What’s even more unusual is that, unlike contemporary genre fiction writers like Stephen King or George Martin, who write incredibly long books; Bradbury produced mostly short fiction. Even *Fahrenheit 451* like H.G. Wells’ seminal science fiction work *The Time Machine* is almost more of a novella than a novel.
* Although Ray Bradbury is associated with science fiction, he’s really not a science fiction writer. The science and technology in his stories is used more for effect and usually their factual basis is pretty shaky. Bradbury was more of a science fantasy writer and sometimes a magic realist, that is when he wasn’t writing mysteries or horror stories or children’s books or whatever he felt like writing. He defies genres and that is often the sign of a great writer.

**Origin Stories**

Ray Douglas Bradbury was born on August 22, 1920, in Waukegan, Illinois. It’s been said that the American Midwest served as a model for some of the more nostalgic elements in novels as *Dandelion Wine* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. When you read these books you find yourself in Green Town, an idealized version of small town life in places like Ohio, Illinois and Wisconsin. You also can understand why Bradbury and the Walt Disney Company collaborated so many times over the years. I’ve often suspected that Main Street U.S.A. was originally built in Green Town.

As a child, Bradbury was an enthusiastic radio listener, movie goer and reader of comic strips. In other words, he drank deeply and gratefully from the fountain of popular culture and imagination. He tells of how he used to collect the daily Buck Rogers science fiction strip from the *Waukegan News-Sun* but when he was nine years old, Bradbury stopped clipping out the strips and threw away his entire collection.

Why? Because his friends in the fourth grade teased him and said that Buck Rogers was silly. The Future was not going to happen.

Bradbury described this as a turning point in his life. One morning about two weeks later he woke up crying.

I asked myself: “Why am I crying, who died?” The answer was me. I asked: “Why am I dying, what am I dying of?” The answer that came was that I was dying because I had destroyed the future because I had listened to those fools.

'Then I said: “Well, what's the solution, how can I not die?” And the answer was, go back and collect comic strips and Buck Rogers and make your life whole. So I went back and started collecting again. All of a sudden all of my life came back, all of my love.

And then I made up my mind that I would never listen to another damn fool ever in my life. That was the day I learned that I was right and everybody else was wrong. If God treats you well by teaching you a disastrous lesson, you never forget it.



Like many people during the Great Depression the Bradbury family drove across the country to Los Angeles in 1934, and, at least in my opinion, the 14 year old Ray became the prototype Fanboy:

He would hang around the Hollywood Studios to seek out the autographs of movie stars. He was even successful in getting comedian George Burns to buy some of Bradbury’s jokes for his radio show.

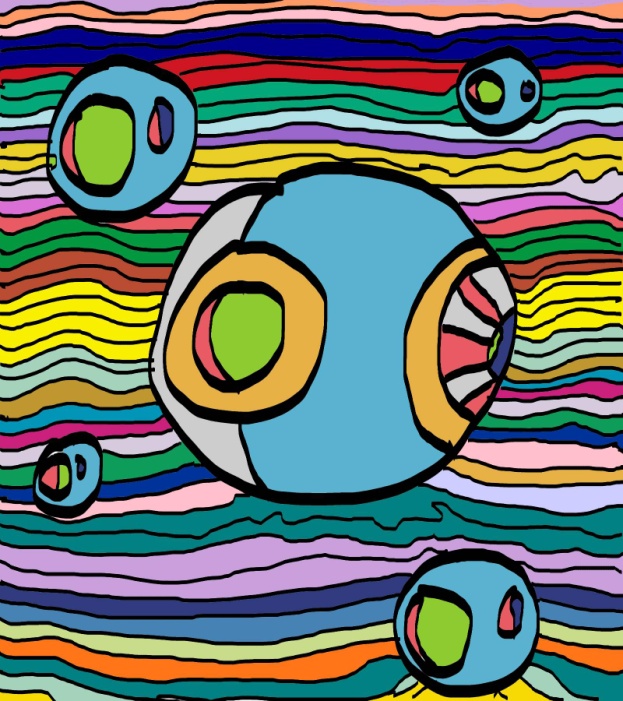
In 1936, Bradbury was at a secondhand bookstore in Hollywood and discovered a handbill promoting meetings of the "Los Angeles Science Fiction Society." Thrilled, he joined a weekly Thursday-night conclave that would eventually include such science-fiction legends as, Forest Ackerman, Robert A. Heinlein and Leigh Brackett. Membership in groups such as this were (and are) often instrumental in providing the creative support in becoming a writer – and Bradbury’s first published works were in fanzines published by members of this writers group.

In the late 1930s, he also became friends with a special effects and animation artist named Ray Harryhausen, another fan-boy type with a stop motion animation studio in his garage. Harryhausen would go on to work with Willis O’Brien the man who animated the original *King Kong* (One of Ray Bradbury’s favourite movies) and then create a process called Dynamation, which would be used in classic films like *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad, Earth Versus the Flying Saucers, The First Men in the Moon* and the original *Clash of the Titans*. Of course, Bradbury and Harryhausen became lifelong friends.

After his short story “Homecoming” was rejected by the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, Bradbury sent his short story "Homecoming" to the women’s magazine *Mademoiselle*. At the time *Mademoiselle was known for publishing short stories by important writers such as* [Joyce Carol Oates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joyce_Carol_Oates), [William Faulkner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Faulkner), and [Tennessee Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennessee_Williams). Here Bradbury’s story was spotted by a young editorial assistant named Truman Capote, who rescued the manuscript from the slush pile and helped get it published in the magazine. "Homecoming" went on to win a place in The O. Henry Prize Stories of 1947.

When Bradbury’s novel *The Martian Chronicles* was first released, Bradbury (by chance) met the noted writer and literary critic Christopher Isherwood at a Los Angeles bookstore. Bradbury, like every young writer should be, was incredibly quick on his feet and give Isherwood a copy of the novel. Soon afterwards Isherwood praised *The Martian Chronicles* in his 1950 review column. This is some of what Mr. Isherwood said:

It may even be argued that *The Martian Chronicles* are not, strictly speaking, science fiction at all. The most firmly established convention of science fiction is that its writers shall use all their art to convince us that their stories *could* happen. The extraordinary must grow from roots in the ordinary. The scientific "explanations" must have an authoritative air. (There are, as a matter of fact, some science-fiction writers whose work is so full of abstruse technicalities that only connoisseurs can read it.) Such is not Mr. Bradbury's practice. His brilliant, shameless fantasy makes, and needs, no excuses for its wild jumps from the possible to the impossible. His interest in machines seems to be limited to their symbolic and aesthetic aspects. I doubt if he could pilot a rocket ship, much less design one.



It’s interesting to compare Isherwood’s review with some of Bradbury’s fellow science fiction writers. **Lyon Sprague de Camp** said that Bradbury would improve:

"…when he escapes from the influence of [Hemingway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hemingway) and [Saroyan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Saroyan)", placing him in "the tradition of anti-science-fiction writers [who] see no good in the machine age".

Back in the 1950s, glossy monthly magazines – not television or YouTube or Netflix – were the primary means of visual and narrative entertainment. Having captured the imagination of people like Isherwood, Bradbury’s stories were being regularly published in *Collier’s, Esquire, McCall’s* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

From there Bradbury has gone on to become an important part of school and university curriculums and his works continue to sell well decades after their (initial?) publication. *Fahrenheit 451* was first printed in 1953, sixty years later, it is still selling over 50,000 copies a year. At one level this is evidence that literary products with the name “Ray Bradbury” on them, have great brand identity and that Bradbury is one of the few genre authors who isn’t a guilty pleasure to read. But at a deeper level, this enduring legacy tells us that Bradbury‘s work and vision touch something very deep within us – something that crosses generations and reaches across cultures.

**Some Bradbarian Contradictions**

In *Fahrenheit 451* Ray Bradbury is the champion of the book and condemns electronic and mass media like television and comic books as the insidious tools that “dumb down” our culture and ultimately the main tools in the destruction of human freedom.

Beatty, Montag’s supervisor at the Fire Station explains why it became necessary to burn books:

“…Don’t step on the toes of the dog-lovers, the cat-lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynies, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico. The people in this book, this play, the TV serial are not meant to represent any actual painters, cartographers, mechanics anywhere. The bigger your market…the less you handle controversy...

…Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters. They did. Magazines became a nice blend of vanilla tapioca. Books, so the damned snobbish critics said, were dishwater. No wonder books stopped selling...But the public knowing what it wanted, spinning happily let the comic books survive. And the three-dimensional sex magazines, of course.”

So traditional culture like books are good. Contemporary media culture is bad. Right?

With Bradbury it is actually very hard to say.

Bradbury was one of the first science fiction writers to generate serious and continuous adaptations outside of conventional text and print.



**Radio**

Throughout the 1950s, his stories were regularly adapted for radio on American national networks on programmes such as *Suspense, X-Minus One* and *Dimension X*. Bradbury’s stories were also adapted for CBC Radio on anthology series such as *Nightfall* and *Vanishing Point* and in the 1970s and 1980s. Also in the 1980s, *Bradbury 13* -- a series solely dedicated to audio dramatizations of Bradbury’s stories was produced at Brigham Young University’s media arts studios.

Radio drama shares some of same strengths as Bradbury’s prose fiction – evocative words, powerful descriptions combined with strong and passionate voices and augmented with sounds and music to actively engage the imagination of the audience. There are some chilling and magnificent moments in those Bradbury radio dramas – from the gradually building terror of “Zero Hour” in the 1950s series *Suspense* to the beautiful soundscapes of *Bradbury 13*. The later series had some of Bradbury’s favourite adaptations of his work – and they appealed to other people as well because they won a Peabody Award and two Gold Cindy Awards.

My favourite “Radio Bradbury” experience came when I first heard the 1950 adaptation of *The Martian Chronicles* on the NBC series *Dimension X*. The broadcast began with the announcement that this week’s episode featured a dramatization of “the bold new bestseller by one of America’s leading new authors”. I had never heard Bradbury nor his work spoken of in those terms before – he was always one of the “elders” of science fiction and his writings were classics of the field. It is a little humbling and awe-inspiring to consider what endures and what passes away in our culture and our imaginations.

Many of these radio adaptions can be found on-line and in the audio books sections of some bookstores and libraries. I strongly recommend you give them a listen.

**Comic Books**

Bradbury’s stories were also regularly featured in comic books and graphic novels, again, a paradox. Bradbury, the defender of literary excellence and freedom, but also Bradbury, the collector of Buck Rogers and fanboy-lover of pop culture. There’s ample proof of the former designation. Some of the most interesting adaptations of his work can be discovered in the pages of some of the rawest and most controversial, allegedly juvenile delinquent-generating, comics of the last century.

According to Brian Cronin in his book *Was Superman a Spy? And other Comic Book Legends Revealed*, in the early 1950s – Bradbury discovered that EC Comics, publishers of such “respected” titles as *Tales from the Crypt, Weird Science, Shock Suspense Stories* and *Vault of Horror* – were printing unauthorized (and unpaid for) adaptations of his stories. Bradbury’s solution was elegant and cordial. He wrote to the publisher and suggested and that they officially collaborate. That way the creator would be compensated and the publisher would gain prestige and greater sales through the association with an important writer. There is also the benefit that these are very well drawn and written graphic stories.



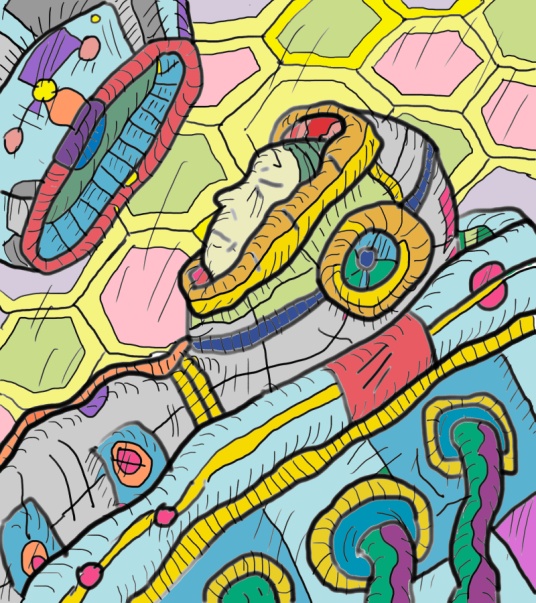
As with the radio adaptations, there have been more recent illustrated adaptations including *Ray Bradbury Comics* and graphic novels of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and even *Fahrenheit 451.* Since comic books were the tools of the enemy in that book I find its graphic novel version rather ironic, or perhaps contradictory?

**Television**

Bradbury’s work also appeared on television very soon after the medium became popular after World War II. Anthology drama series – which featured a new cast and a story every week – were very common in the 1950s and early 1960s and Bradbury’s stories were well suited to this format. So you would find versions of his stories on programmes such as *Tales of Tomorrow, Lights Out, Studio 57, Playhouse 90* and of course *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Only one of Bradbury’s stories “I Sing the Body Electric” was presented on *The Twilight Zone* although he tried to sell more scripts to that series. Apparently there was some friction between Bradbury and Rod Serling *The Twilight Zone’s* host and main writer. It is possible to see some of these programmes on DVD or on-line and if you you’re one of those viewers that enjoy black and white images rather than avoid them – then you will likely find these programmes worth your time.

Anthology series became rarer and rarer in the 1970s and 1980s and accordingly we didn’t find quite as much Bradbury on television. The exceptions were various made-for-TV films, a 1979 mini-series of *The Martian Chronicles* that Bradbury dismissed as “just boring” and from 1985 to 1992 the then new venue of pay television produced *The Ray Bradbury Theater.* What was interesting about *The Ray Bradbury Theater* was Bradbury was much more directly involved in the production than with other TV projects. Like Rod Serling on *The Twilight Zone,* Bradbury was the host and the voice of the show and he wrote all of the scripts (Serling only wrote 80% of the Twilight Zones). In my opinion, I’m sorry to say, *The Ray Bradbury Theater*, is not as consistent in its quality as *The Twilight Zone*. *TRBT* scripts as a rule are excellent, but the direction and production values are extremely variable. I can say that the *TRBT* segments filmed in Toronto were among the best.

What can we gather from this survey? Well, for an artist who was sometimes hostile to the media, Bradbury is very likely one of the most televised writers in history. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Mildred, the wife of Montag our protagonist fireman lusts for a fourth wall-screen on their television so that she can be fully immersed in her TV fantasies. The shows of course are stupid, vapid and incredibly violent – more agents of evil. In the film version, Mildred actually participates in one of her TV soap operas but her role is so contrived and meaningless and her performance so robotic that the entire exercise is nothing more than a futuristic sham.



So, books good. TV bad.

However, I wonder how Bradbury would have written these scenes if Mildred was using her giant TV cube to watch computer-enhanced repeats of The Ray Bradbury Theater?

Yet another contradiction.

**Film**

When we look at Bradbury’s relationship to the cinema, the paradox is more about how much he loved the movies and how much the movies didn’t love him back.

Bradbury was star-struck from childhood. Some of his most formative artistic experiences were when his mother took him to see films such as *King Kong, Dracula* and *Frankenstein.* Bradbury further describes this influence and underscores that he truly was one of the first and most important cross-media artists:

I told my friends I was going to be a radio actor. I started to hang around the local station, emptied the trash, ran errands. Two weeks later I was reading the comic strips to the kiddies on the air. I still have all those comics put away. Buck Rogers! My pay was free tickets to the movies: *King Kong, The Mummy, The Wax Museum*. How lucky can you get!

As I mentioned earlier, Bradbury spent a lot of his teenage years hanging around movie studios, he also roller-skated to movie premieres and collected magazines about film stars and celebrities. It is not surprising that as with radio, comics and television – Bradbury was an early entry into cinema treatments starting with *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms in 1953* (which was inspired by his story “The Fog Horn”) and in the same year *It Came From Outer Space,* which was based on Bradbury’s original script treatment titled “The Meteor”. (*It Came From Outer Space* was also the first Hollywood produced 3D science fiction movie). As with other media, Bradbury started early and his stories have continued to be translated into the 21st Century.

The results have been uneven. Roger Ebert wrote that the 1969 film adaptation of *The Illustrated Man* was:

(Director) Jack Smight's confused, wandering film never does quite come to terms with what it wants to be. …It has its weaknesses -- of acting, of character -- but they are not fatal. What finally brings the movie down is its inadequate attention to the expectations of the audience. … And so the film finally doesn't work for the same reason that comic Westerns usually fail: Because it's risky to fool around with a genre unless you know what you're doing.

The 1966 cinema version of *Fahrenheit 451*, written and directed by Francois Truffaut, one of the greatest film-makers of the 20th Century, seemed to have more potential. This was a film that was made by people with a great deal of intelligence, talent and artistic sensibilities. Like Bradbury himself.

But there were problems with the script, casting and budget, and all of this shows up (in?) what we see on the screen. The Turner Classic Movies website has a very good account of the audience and critical response to the film:

Nevertheless, when *Fahrenheit 451* opened theatrically, critics were just as vocal about their disappointment in the film as the sci-fi fans were. Typical of the lot was Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* when he wrote, "Holy Smoke! What a pretentious and pedantic production he has made of Ray Bradbury's futuristic story." Admirers of Truffaut, on the other hand, felt like he had sold out by making a big-budget Hollywood-financed film in color with an English cast. But there were a few favorable reviews such as *Time's* assessment: "A weirdly gay little picture that assails with both horror and humor all forms of tyranny over the mind of man...*Fahrenheit 451* may not prove to be the flash point of the average moviegoer, but it should work up a gentle glow among the admirers of Director Francois Truffaut."

Bradbury conceded that this was probably the best film version of one of his stories and publicly stated that it successfully “captured the spirit” of the original novel. He did say that he was not happy with some of the casting and that it suffered because Truffaut eliminated the Mechanical Hound. I agree: somehow they should have found a way to hire Ray Harryhausen to do a stop-motion animated version of that cool and scary robotic creature.

The film does feature a wonderful orchestral soundtrack by one of the greatest film composers in history, Bernard Hermann. The music works beautifully in the film and as composition on its own. Listen to it if you get the chance.

My last example of Ray Bradbury in cinema is the 2005 adaptation of “A Sound of Thunder”. (I don’t even want to talk about the 1985 film of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*). Let’s return to Robert Ebert and see what he had to say about it:

“A Sound of Thunder” looks cobbled together from a half-baked screenplay and underdone special effects, but it’s made with a certain heedless zeal that makes you smile if you’re in tune with it.”

Ebert is being much kinder to the film than I was. My reaction was that I had just lost 90 minutes of my life that I was never going to get back. If you go to the Rotten Tomatoes site you will see that it gets an average rating of 6% or one star out of five -- I agree with that score.

What is really disturbing is that not only did Hollywood treat Bradbury’s work badly, it could even be said film-makers were unkind to Bradbury personally. Sam Peckinpaw, the American film-maker, was a drinking buddy but Bradbury stated that they did too much of that when Peckinpaw should have been making a good version of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* – a something that could have been a classic of American cinema. I hope, at least, Peckinpaw paid for his own drinks.

But the worst example of writer abuse is how director John Houston treated Bradbury during the production of *Moby Dick*. When he was first approached Bradbury did not want the assignment – he hadn’t even read the novel. But Houston persisted and Bradbury was seduced at the prospect of working with the gifted director of films such as *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which were among Bradbury’s favourite films.

Bradbury soon found himself trapped in a mansion in Ireland with Houston for a year, writing the screenplay for *Moby Dick*. The experience was not a good one for Bradbury. In fact it was so traumatic for Bradbury that he spoke of how, years later, he still had nightmares of John Houston dragging him into the ocean at night and drowning him.

To my knowledge, Bradbury never wrote anything negative about movies and the people who made them in his fiction. The murderous heroes of “Usher II” who create an animatronic haunted castle to punish those who have burned books and destroyed dreams – these cultural avengers -- are former movie-makers and actors.

The contradiction of Bradbury and the cinema is the paradox of someone who can’t help loving an unkind and unfaithful lover. My personal theory is that Hollywood is very jealous of what Bradbury at his best can do. The power of Bradbury as a writer is that his text is immediately and vividly sensory. You read it, you see it, you feel it. That power can take you into terrible futures and horrific places or to fantastic futures and wondrous spaces. It’s like he puts an IMAX theatre in your head.

Movie producers try to do that with every crop of summer blockbusters, except that they need a lot more time, money and technology to do it.

Perhaps future generations of film-makers will recognize their debt to Bradbury and be more creative and more respectful to his work.



**A Dystopian Case Study: Fahrenheit 451**

In 1953, the Hugo Award for best science fiction novel went to *The Demolished Man* by Alfred Bester. That same year, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction went to Earnest Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*; the novel at the top of the New York Times Bestseller list in June 1953 was *Desiree* by Annemarie Selinko.

1953 was also the year that *Fahrenheit 451* was first published.

So why are we here talking about Ray Bradbury today and not Hemingway or Alfred Bester? Why is *Fahrenheit 451* the book featured in the Toronto Public Library's Community Read for 2913 and not *The Old Man and the Sea* or *Desiree*? And how many of you have read these other books in comparison to those you who have read *Fahrenheit 451*?

Why is the book still so relevant to us?

If we use the perspective of Ray Bradbury: Pessimistic Optimist/Optimistic Pessimist to examine *Fahrenheit 451* in detail we may find some reasons why Ray Bradbury is important to us in the 21st Century.



**What’s Wrong?**

If there is a future world that Ray Bradbury most wants to prevent it would have to be the one he envisions in *Fahrenheit 451*:

* Human thought and imagination has been ground down by the forces of conformity, mindless consumption and shallow complacency. The shadow side to this placid psychology are occasional bursts of violence and cruelty.
* Freedom of expression -- not just expression, but all thought, education, discourse and even spontaneity -- are either discouraged or forbidden outright.
* Science and technology are not used to explore new realms of knowledge and nature but towards military arms or to lull the population into a false sense of happiness.
* There is no true sense of community. People live together but they always live alone; and therefore they are truly powerless.

This future is not a good place to live but we, as members of a democratic society, we have a responsibility to visit there.

**The “Grand” Dystopias**

One of the reasons we talk about *Fahrenheit 451* in 2013 is because it is one of the classic novels of its type. Along with George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, *Fahrenheit 451* is one of the World's great dystopian novels. Each of these works explores specific social trends and concerns and then maps what could happen to us if they carry on:

* *1984 -* is concerned with the effects of total state authority and long-term total on the lives of everyday people. Orwell, like Bradbury, examines who tyranny and censorship affect not just literature but every aspect of our lives and even language and thought itself. While the Firemen of *Fahrenheit 451* roll up to your house and burn your books outright, the work of the Ministry of Truth is quieter but just as effective. Here troublesome words, ideas and people are systematically identified and eliminated.
* *Brave New World* posits a scientific world state with a genetically enforced class structure. As with *Fahrenheit 451*, art, beauty and truth are drowned out by mindless mass hedonism and consumerism. Culture and creativity are either restricted to the Alpha "elites" or more often seen as just in bad taste.
* *Handmaid's Tale* portrays a future theocracy that has absolute authority over the civil and reproductive rights of women. To maintain this control all aspects of life -- including art and culture -- are censored and only seen through the distorted lens of religious extremism.



In all of these dystopias, words, ideas and creative expressions -- especially those that are controversial or even just ambiguous -- are seen as the enemies of authority. I believe that all four authors would agree that any future society that does not permit the freedom to think, feel and share ideas with each other -- is definitely a future worth preventing.

**The Danger of the Word**

What makes *Fahrenheit 451* unique is Bradbury's focus on the book as the primary media for freedom of thought and expression. I've already mentioned the book burnings by the Hitler Youth as one of the inspirations for the novel -- and Bradbury goes on to liken the willful destruction of a book as equivalent to murder:

When Hitler burned a book, I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as killing a human, for in the long sum of history, they are one and the same flesh. … Mind or body, put to the oven, is a sinful practice, and I carried this with me as I passed countless firehouses.

There is a fascinating story about a Language Arts teacher at a high school in Minnesota whose class was studying *Fahrenheit 451*. The teacher decided he wanted to make the assignment more memorable, so he obtained some worn-out books from the school library, took his students to the science lab and under controlled conditions they set fire to these books. The objectives of this exercise were:

1. To find out if book paper really did combust at the temperature of 451 degrees fahrenheit. They weren't able to get an accurate reading so that part of the experiment was a failure.
2. To test their emotional reactions when they watched the books going up in flames. These results were more a little more definite:

Some students were horrified. Even though these books were going to be thrown away anyway, it seemed wrong to destroy them.



Other students said they enjoyed the experience! The students’"positive" reactions included a fascination with the process, excitement at doing something unusual and even a sense of power. To these students, the books were indeed "a pleasure to burn".

Such reactions suggest two things:

1. There may be a small percentage of pyromaniacs among highschool populations.
2. It does not take too much for people to suspend their values and judgment when they are presented with the possibility of excitement and power.

The Lesson? Don't be too smug when you hear about other people burning books. If you're not careful, the next bonfire could be on your block.

**Then**

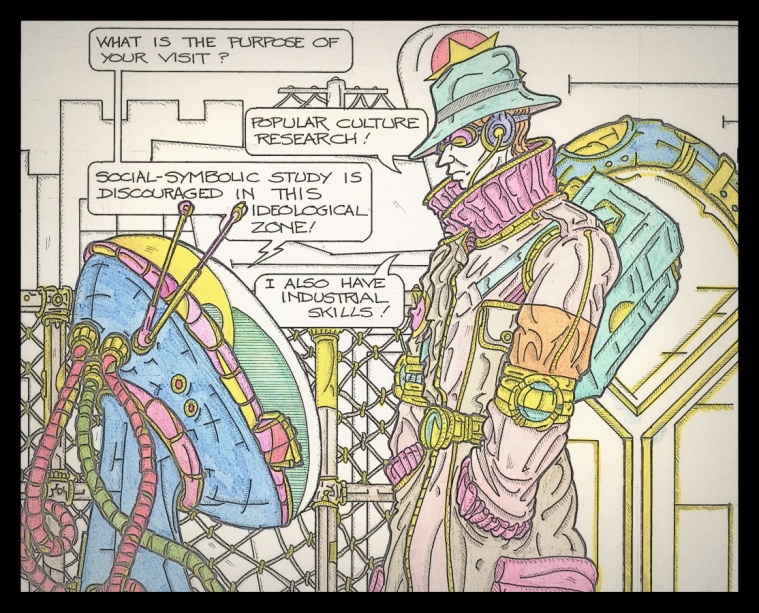
Each of the dystopias I mentioned emerged from the times they were written. In *Brave New World*, Huxley was concerned about the rise of modern industrialism and was suggesting that people being manufactured on assembly lines was not far off. Orwell was writing about the misery of life in post-World War II Britain and the threat of Stalinism, *1984* is much more about 1948 than any future time. *Handmaid's Tale* is more contemporary and posits what might happen if there is a societal backlash against feminism and women's rights.

What was happening in 1950s America that was worrying Ray Bradbury so much?

A great deal.

**Paranoia and Conformity** were widespread. The Cold War with the USSR was in full swing and it was very evident that the Stalinist and Moaist states were anything but friendly or freedom-loving. However, the response in the United States and also to some extent in Canada, was to try and defend freedom by destroying it. If you didn't conform you were suspect, if you had different ideas about politics you could be accused of being a communist spy or "fellow traveller".

Bradbury mentioned that another inspiration for *Fahrenheit 451* was the US Senate Hearings on Un-American Activities where citizens from all levels of society were called up before self-appointed politicians to justify their actions and beliefs.



**Television** was becoming an important factor in our culture as the number of TV sets in North American homes increased exponentially throughout the decade. As we discussed earlier, Bradbury did benefit from the TV adaptation of his work but he also witnessed the compromises this medium demanded. There was continual pressure from broadcasters and sponsors to avoid any controversial content and to pitch the stories to the largest possible audience, in other words, the lowest cultural common denominator. Bradbury was a literary artist and this commercial and political pressure must have caused him great concern.

There were more reasons why Bradbury might see television as the destroyer of culture. Even as early as 1953, there was a massive shift to television and away from other forms of entertainment. By the late 1950s, television had almost completely replaced radio drama, comedies and variety programmes; and the end of the great glossy magazines like *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post* was not far off. Even comic books and cinema had to make major changes to survive the advent of the Age of Television.

What was truly prophetic in *Fahrenheit 451* was Bradbury's ability to see how the fuzzy black and white twelve cathode ray tubes would eventually mutate into the massive plasma screens we have today, and only one step away from the immersive parlor of *Fahrenheit* *451* and the play room from Bradbury’s short story “The Veldt”. Bradbury, and to a lesser extent George Orwell, were among the few writers of speculative fiction, who took television and its effects on society seriously. Most science fiction writers of the time where much more interestd in rockets, time travel, robots and extra-sensory perception.

**Fahrenheit 451** also dramatizes the potential of television to undermine community life. In the novel, as well as in his short story "The Pedestrian" Bradbury describes how people are essentially prisoners of their TV sets. They come home from work, lock themselves in their homes, turn on the TV and watch the flickering images until it’s time to go to bed, then it is tomorrow and you get up and go to work...

There is no reason to go out of your house in the evening so there is no opportunity to communicate and connect with anyone outside your immediate circle. The people who do go out and walk around are the oddballs and the objects of official suspicion.

At several points in *Fahrenheit 451*, the action and the conversation is suddenly interrupted by the roar of jet engines overhead. The engines belong to bombers loaded with atomic weapons. Very early in the book we learn that the world is on the verge of war, the military is in a state of high alert and that nuclear war could break out anytime. Perhaps just as disturbing is the realization that the residents of Bradbury's future world don't seem to understand the danger they’re in and there doesn't seem to be any vocabulary to allow them to wish for, let alone work for, peace.

The ongoing arms race and the accompanying doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction were relatively new developments in 1953. America only had the atomic bomb since 1945 and in 1949 Russia tested its first nuclear weapon and grim possibility MAD became a driving force in geo-politics until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Like his understanding of the force of television, Bradbury was extremely prophetic in his portrayal of life under the constant threat of nuclear war.



The post-World War II era was also a time of tremendous economic growth and expansion in North America. The brave men and women who gave us victory in war returned home to work, start families, buy homes and build communities

The Downside of all this economic growth and expansion was all this economic growth and expansion. There were unexpected and sometimes rather high costs for this protracted economic boom in the forms of urban sprawl, environmental degradation, growing alienation and a decline in community spirit.

When I first read *Fahrenheit 451* in the early 1970s, I imagined the setting to be the same sort of suburban neighbourhood with low-rise offices and schools, strip malls and big roads that I grew up in -- just writ large with monorails and robot dogs. In other words, a community with no identity, nor memory, located somewhere in a concrete and asphalt landscape of nowhere.

**Now**

There was a lot to protest about in the 1950s and the protest of *Fahrenheit 451* was certainly effective in that it captured and held our attention. But how much did the book contribute to change in the world? How well did Ray Bradbury succeed in preventing the future he described?

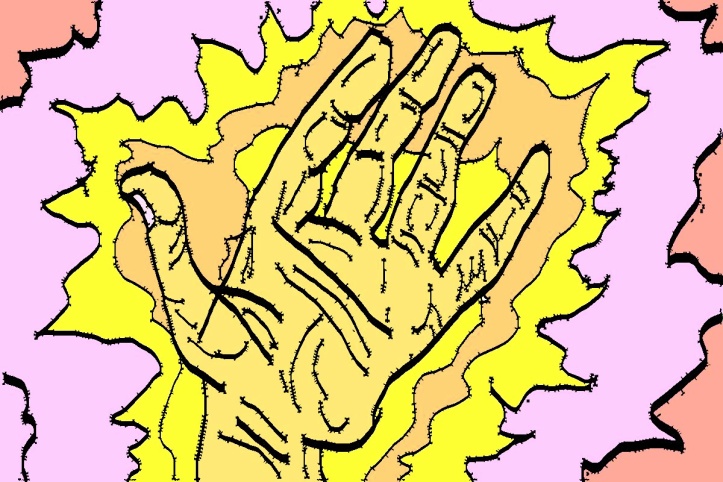
It is not possible to measure exactly how a particular work of fiction has helped change the world but it is interesting to compare our condition to that of the early 1950s:

**The Arms Race** – up until recently I would have said that the danger of a nuclear confrontation was receeding. North Korea may have different ideas. However, the era of Mutual Assured Destruction with the superpowers poised over the button has passed. Another however, there are far too many nuclear weapons in existence to believe that such brinkmanship will never return.

**Alienated and dysfunctional communities** – this is a complicated matter and is very dependent on the particular community you live in. In the case of our community of the GTA, we are still losing too much farmland to suburban developments and in my opinion many of those steel and glass condominium buildings going up look like something out of a dystopia. Alternatively we can take a great deal of comfort in the efforts of local arts groups, service organizations and even libraries that make Toronto a friendly and exciting place to live.



**Television** -- The current state of TV is complicated too. The medium is more diverse and pervasive than it’s ever been but it is not the cultural monolith that it was in the 20th Century. Television is still producing reality programmes and talk shows that are as cruel and stupid as “The White Clown” from *Fahrenheit 451* but many critics note that we are living in a “Second Golden Age of Television” with some of best dramas, films and documentaries every produced. In the 21st Century, Television is also being replaced as the primary provider of information and entertainment – at least for younger people. The Internet may be doing to Television in the 2010s, what Television did to Radio and the glossy magazines.



**At What Temperature Does an Idea Combust?**

The world then is a different place than Bradbury predicted in *Fahrenheit 451*. So why are we still talking about this book? What’s the main problem that still worries us? What’s the “big idea” behind *Fahrenheit 451*?

Simply that ideas and the books that communicate them are both wonderful and terrifying.

*Fahrenheit 451* is a book that tells us that books are very powerful things indeed. Books preserve and convey ideas, feelings and experiences in ways that no other medium can do. A book is a form of almost direct communication from the mind of the author to the mind of the reader. Once the reader picks up a book and has read it – it’s just too late – no outside agency can make them unread it.

A book can allow you to go anywhere, any time in the World, in the universe for that matter. A book can also let you experience these times and places through the eyes and hearts of people you imagine you could never connect with.

What might it have been like to be a Neanderthal? Read *The Inheritors* by William Golding. What is it like to be a lesbian teenager stuck in a terrible relationship while starting university? Check out *(You) Set Me on Fire,* by Mariko Tamaki. What do you do when you’re a boring middle aged guy and your home planet blows up? Read Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* books.

Because I tend to define things with concepts from science fiction I sometimes think of books as telepathic time machines. You can go anywhere, to any time and do whatever is found within that book. If you flip open the pages you will discover that the inside realms are much vaster and richer than the cover outside.

By now I hope I have convinced you that books are one of the most incredible inventions in human history. I also have to share with you the fact that when books get that powerful, they can also be incredibly dangerous.

Books contain ideas and information. Ideas and information can change the way people look at the world and the way they behave in the world. Books can also spread ideas and information at a vast level and they can do this very reliably. If the power goes out, you may not be able to get on the internet. But you can still read some books.

If enough people’s attitudes and actions change, then whole communities, whole societies can change. That can be quite disruptive sometimes because there are social agendas out there:

* Some people want to control ideas and information because they think it will help take us to a better future than the one we have now.
* Some people want to control communication and discourse because they want to create a view of the past that might not have actually happened, but that they are much more comfortable with.
* Some people are afraid of change and will do just about anything, including suppressing ideas and information, to stop that change.



Books, especially books that excite and inspire their readers, books that change what people do and say in their lives – these books can be a real problem to those forces that would like to control or stop change. Books are dangerous because they are such a potent mix of reality and the imagination:

* Someone wants to downplay the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust? Read *Night* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* and see if you agree with that.
* Someone says that the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle against Apartheid weren’t important? Page through *A Testament of Hope* by Martin Luther King Jr. and *Cry the Beloved Country* and see what you think about that.
* Somebody is saying that the Occupy and Idle No More will amount to nothing. I’m sure that writers are out there working on those books and it will be very interesting to read with they have to say.

Books are invaluable tools for providing the insights we need to seek out truth and fight for justice. In my science fiction terminology: the time machine has returned and here is the evidence of what really happened.

In the past twenty years, the term “culture war” has been coined in the press and in academic circles to describe conflicts where factions in society argue about the “true” meaning of history. People are usually in dispute on questions of identity, morality and authenticity. At the heart of most culture wars are questions about who we really are, what did we really do and was it really the right or wrong thing to do?

Is it right to describe the numbers of civilian casualties and suffering involved in an exhibition about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima? Should histories of Canada talk about the abuse and cultural damage caused by residential schools? Should we explore the reasons why the Canadian government of the time cancelled the AVRO Arrow programme?

These are all previous examples of culture wars that actually happened and the questions can still spark intense and sometimes quite hostile debate. It is no coincidence that ground zero for most culture wars are museums, art galleries, universities and yes, libraries. That is because these places are the community repositories of memory and identity.

My view is that *Fahrenheit 451* is actually a war story, a culture war story. Bradbury’s book describes a future where the proponents of truth are fighting a guerrilla war against a delusional mass society and its mass media. It is a losing war, only because mass society manages to nuke itself. Is there any possibility of a better future?

\*\*

**Tomorrow**

I am now going to return to the question I started at the start of this talk:

Is Ray Bradbury a friend or an enemy to the future? I would say that Bradbury is the pessimistic optimist. He is therefore the friend to the future. Sometimes he is the qualified friend and sometimes the enthusiastic friend, but we can explore why that is a little bit later.

Bradbury, the pessimistic optimist, emerges when we compare the ending of *Fahrenheit 451* to the resolutions of the other great dystopias:

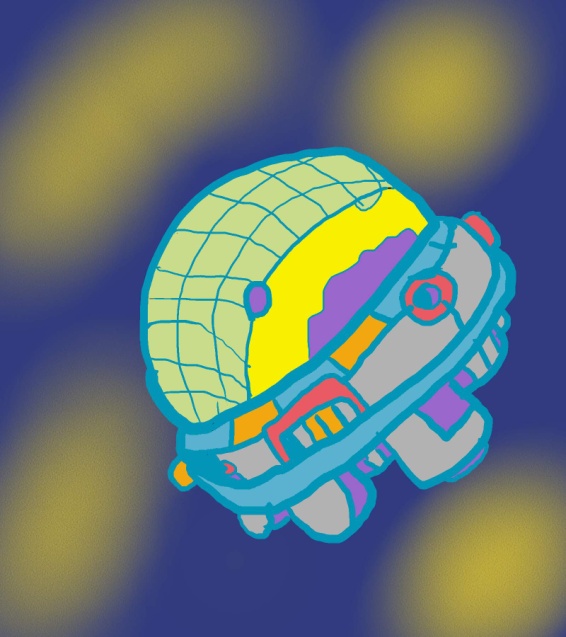
* In *Brave New World*, John Savage, the last representative of enlightened civilization is put on display in a “nature preserve” and finally commits suicide.
* Julia and Winston, the doomed lovers in *1984* betray each other and wait to be liquidated by Big Brother’s Thought Police.
* The ending of *Handmaid’s Tale* is a little more ambiguous. We do know that the tyrannical theocracy of Gideon does eventually collapse but could be centuries in the future and does our protagonists no good. We hope they escape to the relative safety Canada but nothing is certain.

The conclusion of *Fahrenheit 451* offers us a little more hope. Nuclear war does break out but Montag escapes and starts a new and more meaningful life as a “living book”. He and others on this side of the culture war preserve these texts in their memories and teach them to others. Eventually, these texts will be re-printed as the civilization rebuilds.

Looking beyond *Fahrenheit 451* I found one quite unique example from Ray Bradbury’s body of work that I believe most beautifully captures his vision as a pessimistic optimist. It comes from the introductory notes to a scenario that Bradbury wrote for the Spaceship Earth pavilion at EPCOT. Before I quote from these notes, let us consider the significance of the fact that Bradbury took on the assignment.

He was writing for the Walt Disney Corporation and he was writing for its premiere theme park. There is no real surprise there, Bradbury and Disney collaborated numerous times and he even wrote the scenario for the American Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair in 1964. The U.S. Information Agency commissioned the production the Pavilion to Walt Disney. Bradbury was also a fan of theme parks and midways in general – his visit to the New York World’s Fair in 1939 was another key experience in his development as a writer and carnivals and fairs often appear in his fiction. The most notable being Cooger & Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show from *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

There seems to be no hint of the pessimist here. There does not seem to be any room for dystopian musings in the Experimental Prototypical Community of Tomorrow and certainly not in the Magic Kingdom! Did Bradbury simply suppress his cautionary instincts when the cheque with the mouse ears arrived in the mail? Was he all gee-whizz and wonder? Is Bradbury, the enthusiastic friend of the future, the sort of friend you can just rent?



I do not believe Bradbury was simply serving as a writer for hire when he wrote for Disney. I believe he was staying true to the same vision and values he expressed in *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Martian* *Chronicles*. This is part of what he wrote as a mission statement for Spaceship Earth at EPCOT:

What we need, our show makes clear is, access to accurate and relevant information. What we need is an opportunity to learn the alternatives, choices and options available. What we need is broad public understanding of the consequences of our decisions. What we need is the confidence born of greater participation, greater understanding, greater knowledge. What we need is to take the correct course of action.

Dystopia and disaster are not inevitable, Bradbury is telling us. Utopia may never be attainable but a better life for everyone is possible if we have access to accurate information and we are able to participate in making responsible decisions. Libraries, the places that fed and shaped Ray Bradbury’s imagination, are our repositories of accurate information, of truth, and as such they are among our most powerful preventative measures against the world of *Fahrenheit 451*.



I am going to leave you by returning to Christopher’s Isherwood’s 1953 review of *The Martian Chronicles*, who very early on understood the wonderful contradiction of Ray Bradbury’s art:

Have I made this book sound depressing? It is not--despite its dreadfully timely theme, and one's knowledge that the worst part of its prophecy may well come true, not in 2005 but this very next year. Only the second-rate artist depresses his readers. In work such as this, the sheer lift and power of a truly original imagination exhilarates you, almost in spite of yourself. So I urge even the squeamish to try Mr. Bradbury. His is a very great and unusual talent.

Thank you.

