

Introduction to *Fahrenheit 451* by Neil Gaiman, 2013

Sometimes writers write about a world that does not yet exist. We do it for a hundred reasons. (Because it's good to look forward, not back. Because we need to illuminate a path we hope or we fear humanity will take. Because the world of the future seems more enticing or more interesting than the world of today. Because we need to warn you. To encourage. To examine. To imagine.) The reasons for writing about the day after tomorrow, and all the tomorrows that follow it, are as many and as varied as the people writing.

This is a book of warning. It is a reminder that what we have is valuable, and that sometimes we take what we value for granted.

There are three phrases that make possible writing about the world of not-yet (you can call it science fiction or speculative fiction; you can call it anything you wish) and they are simple phrases: *What if...? If only...? If this goes on...*

“What if...?” gives us change, a departure from our lives (*What if aliens landed tomorrow and gave us everything we wanted, but at a price?*)

“If only...” lets us explore the glories and dangers of tomorrow. (*If only dogs could talk. If only I were invisible.*)

“If this goes on...” is the most predictive of the three, although it doesn't try to predict an actual future with all its messy confusion. Instead, “If this goes on...” fiction takes an element of life today, something clear and obvious and normally something troubling, and asks what would happen if that thing, that one thing, became bigger, became all-pervasive, changed the way we thought and behaved. (*If this goes on, all communication everywhere will be through text messages or computers, and direct speech between two people, without a machine, will be outlawed.*)

People think—wrongly—that speculative fiction is about predicting the future, but it isn't; or if it is, it tends to do a rotten job of it. Futures are huge things that come with many elements and a billion variables, and the human race has a habit of listening to predictions for what the future will bring and then doing something quite different.

What speculative fiction is really good at is not the future but the present—taking an aspect of it that troubles or is dangerous, and extending and extrapolating that aspect into something that allows the people of that time to see what they are doing from a different angle and from a different place. It's cautionary.

Fahrenheit 451 is speculative fiction. It's an "If this goes on..." story. Ray Bradbury was writing about his present, which is our past. He was warning us about things; some of those things are obvious, and some of them, half a century later, are harder to see.

More than half a century has passed since 1953. In America in 1953, the comparatively recent medium of radio was already severely on the wane—its reign had lasted about thirty years, but now the exciting new medium of television had come into ascendancy, and the dramas and comedies of radio were either ending for good or reinventing themselves with a visual track on the "idiot box."

The news channels in America warned of juvenile delinquents—teenagers in cars who drove dangerously and lived for kicks. The Cold War was going on—a war between Russia and its allies and America and its allies in which nobody dropped bombs or fired bullets because a dropped bomb could tip the world into a Third World War, a nuclear war from which it would never return. The senate was holding hearings to root out hidden Communists and taking steps to stamp out comic books. And whole families were gathering around the television in the evenings.

"If this goes on..." thought Ray Bradbury, "nobody will read books anymore," and *Fahrenheit 451* began. He had written a short story once called "The Pedestrian," about a man who is incarcerated by the police after he is stopped simply for walking. That story became part of the world he was building, and seventeen-year-old Clarisse McLellan becomes a pedestrian in a world where nobody walks.

He called the Los Angeles fire department and asked them at what temperature paper burned. *Fahrenheit 451*, somebody told him. He had his title. It didn't matter if it was true or not.

The book was published and acclaimed. People loved the book, and they argued about it. It was a novel about censorship, they said, about mind control, about humanity. About government control of our lives. About books.

I read *Fahrenheit 451* as a boy: I did not understand Guy Montag, did not understand why he did what he did, but I understood the love of books that drove him. The huge wall-screen televisions were as futuristic and implausible as the idea that people on the television would talk to me, that I could that part if I had a script.

When I reread it as a teenager, *Fahrenheit 451* had become a book about independence, about thinking for yourself. It was about treasuring books and the

dissent inside the covers of books. It was about how we as humans begin by burning books and end by burning people.

Rereading it as an adult, I find myself marveling at the book once more. It is all of those things, yes, but it is also a period piece. The four-wall television being described is the television of the 1950's: variety shows with symphony orchestras and low-brow comedians, and soap operas. The world of fast-driving, crazy teenagers out for kicks, of an endless cold war that sometimes goes hot, of wives who appear to have no jobs or identities save for their husbands', of bad men being chased by hounds (even mechanical hounds) is a world that feels like it has its roots firmly in the 1950's.

A young reader finding this book today, or the day after tomorrow, is going to have to imagine first a past, and then a future that belongs to that past. But still, the heart of the book remains untouched, and the questions Bradbury raises remain as valid and important.

Why do we need the things in books? The poems, the essays, the stories? Authors disagree. Authors are human and fallible and foolish. Stories are lies after all, tales of people who never existed and the things that never actually happened to them. Why should we read them? Why should we care?

Ideas—written ideas—are special. They are the way we transmit our stories and our thoughts from one generation to the next. If we lose them, we lose our shared history. We lose much of what makes us human. And fiction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gift of seeing the world through their eyes. Fiction is a lie that tells us true things.

I knew Ray Bradbury for the last thirty years of his life, and I was so lucky. He was funny and gentle and always (even at the end, when he was so old he was blind and wheelchair-bound, even then) enthusiastic. I love how his definition of a book is at the end, when he points out that we should not judge our books by their covers, and that some books exist between covers that are perfectly people-shaped.

WNB:

**According to Neil Gaiman, why do we need books?
Do you agree with him? Explain why or why not.**