

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Tuesday, November 1, 2011

Location: Home of Jay and Toby Siegel, 20 River Mountain Drive, Moreland Hills

Hosts: Jay and Toby Siegel

Novel: *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

Opening: After convivial conversation over the delightful refreshments in the lovely setting of the Siegels' home, President Clyde Henry brought to order the gathering of 30 Novel Club members and friends at 8:30. New members and guests were welcomed. Reports were invited; no committee reports were forthcoming. Officer roster has been updated on the website by Catherine LaCroix. Treasurer Mary Douthit reported a June 6 balance of \$1833.35, with eleven more members yet to pay dues. All bills are paid, we think, except that the bill for printing the annual booklet has not yet been received. Minutes of the October meeting were read and accepted.

Carol Fox presented the biographical paper on Ray Bradbury.

Ray Bradbury was born in 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois to a middle-class family. He grew up with a fascination for death and horror stories. His Aunt Neva, who lived next door, introduced him to fairy tales and Edgar Allan Poe, and to a "fabulous mythological country from which [Ray] never quite emerged." He remembers encountering fairy tales at age five, the Oz books at six, and Poe at seven, soon followed by science fiction magazines and comic books. By the age of twelve he was creating new plots for Buck Rogers, Chandu the Magician, and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *The Gods of Mars*, because he couldn't wait for the next episodes in the series to be published.

When Bradbury's father in search of work moved the family to Los Angeles in 1934, Ray began writing "simply dreadful" science fiction in high school, but he also discovered the Los Angeles Science Fiction League, a fan organization. There he was introduced to professional writers such as Robert Heinlein, and there Bradbury found his career focus. The early 1940s served as his apprenticeship period, and by 1947, he had a story in the *O Henry Awards Prize Stories of 1947* and a radio drama in the *Best One-Act Plays of 1947-'48*.

Bradbury's greatest successes emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) both received unprecedented praise from mainstream critics ("who [generally] ...ignored science fiction"), though reaction within the science-fiction community itself was ambivalent. His next two novels, *Dandelion Wine* (1957) and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) were best-sellers in fantasy. He has had a long and successful career publishing short-story collections, with much of their content comprising materials written by the mid-sixties.

Other important features of Bradbury's career include his work in radio, television, and movies. Among his film scripts is that of John Huston's 1953 movie version of *Moby Dick*. He has written film scripts for some of his other stories, though not for the 1966 film of *Fahrenheit 451* adapted and directed by Francois Truffaut.

Though highly successful, Bradbury has not received unmixed reviews. Some science fiction writers reserve the term "science fiction" for work based on "careful extrapolation from contemporaneous scientific knowledge," whereas Bradbury's work may "belong to an American fantasy tradition going back to Poe." Bradbury himself claims more connection with fantasy "depiction of the unreal" than with science fiction, though he acknowledges that *Fahrenheit 451* is his "one science fiction book...based on reality." Bradbury has held the interest of many readers and has garnered an impressive array of awards, including a National Medal of Arts in 2004 and in 2007 a special citation from The Pulitzer Board "for his distinguished, prolific, and deeply influential career as an unmatched author of science fiction and fantasy."

Bradbury suffered a stroke in 1999, and as of 2007 was reported as dictating his work over the phone to his daughter in Arizona, who records and transcribes it before faxing edits back. He is still described as "one of the most celebrated among 20th and 21st century American writers of speculative fiction."

Steven Fox presented the critical paper on *Fahrenheit 451*.

Fahrenheit 451 is often taught in high school, and offers numerous standard "literary analysis" opportunities—but instead let us focus on the world Bradbury presents and its relevance to us and our current world. We in the Novel Club would, in this world, be the literate hobos, the "book people" at the end of the novel. Bradbury's concern over the influence of television has not literally come true, but may be seen as prophetic of the "stupidification" of our culture via reality television. *Fahrenheit 451* may usefully be considered in comparison/contrast to other mid-20th-century dystopian novels such as *Brave*

New World, 1984, and others which present the writers' fears of what the world may be coming to. The most interesting parts of such novels are not the degree of accuracy in their predictions of scientific development, but rather their comments on the human condition. The vapidness of conversations among Bradbury's characters reflects the author's fear of the disappearance of meaningful discourse. Names of characters, such as "Guy" for the main character, seem to be suggestive of elements of their characters. The fictional job of the firemen to burn the books is presented as a populist-driven censoring of individualism similar to that in *Brave New World* and 1984.

Fahrenheit 451 is a fairly linear and not very complex tale. It suggests that the "stupidification" of culture is due to weaknesses of individuals within it, including the readers of the novel.

Interesting contrast can be made between this relatively straightforward novel and the more indirect one from last month, Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*, in which "the word" is an important character—the language itself that presents the time-space continuum. Schulz's prose was found by some readers to be in itself "dazzling." In his own way, Bradbury also characterizes "the word" as living on in spite of the book burning, to endure beyond the "stupidification" of contemporary culture.

Discussion of the novel wove in and out between the first and fifth of the questions offered—the first about how prescient (or not) was Bradbury's 1953 view of the future, and the fifth more focused on the physical form of reading devices in our time and whether changes in such media "bode well or ill for the future of literature's place in our civilization."

Club members conceded that library shelves dominated by electronic media seem to confirm Bradbury's fear for the demise of books, but suggested that the popularity of electronic readers may push back against Bradbury's concern by preserving reading, just in a different form.

Since the ending of the book shows the literature preserved not in book form but in the memories of the "book people," perhaps the conclusion of the book has more to do with preservation of ideas than with the physical form of the book anyway. One reader pointed out that preserving ideas only in memory, which is recreative and volatile, is in itself a dangerous and exciting idea.

Following up on this concept, readers suggested that *Fahrenheit 451* is less about the demise of physical books than about modern people's disinclination to think and to exchange significant ideas. From that perspective, the novel

may foreshadow the loss of critical conversations as electronic media encourage people to retreat into their own personal echo chambers on the internet. Yet at the same time, new technologies and ways of communicating also offer increased ways of stimulating critical thinking.

The observation was made that people who think critically have always been worried about people who don't, and it has probably always been the case that most people don't "think critically" in the intellectual sense. This may be a very ordinary state of affairs, but in some eras anti-intellectualism becomes a force to be feared (scenarios such as Nazi Germany, Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, China under the Cultural Revolution, and the plot of *1984* were mentioned). Bradbury's novel does seem to present another such scenario.

Back to the question of Bradbury's prescience, this novel may not be an accurate foretelling since the material form of books has not changed so much, but the ways that we access the narrative (physically) have changed so much that even though people may read a lot there are more subcultures of reading which don't relate one to another (e.g. students read their own narratives, and don't recognize or respond to those assigned in their education). If the idea of burning books is metaphor for loss of human imagination/critical thinking, perhaps what has happened recently is less of a loss than a transformation, which has made it difficult for one generation to understand and assess another. Or perhaps there has always been disconnection of one kind or another between generations.

Bradbury has defined a totalitarian state that controls certain media, but he didn't foresee the individual media (cell phones, internet) which are harder to control—so that books in his novel may stand for the freedom of communication now represented by the individual electronic media. Readers wondered how this story line would work with a plot containing today's media; one felt that the book is flawed by the "fetishizing" of books; another noted that the morphing of print books (perhaps through market forces rather than burning) into electronic media would involve a loss of imaginative input from readers similar to the loss in moving from radio narratives to television. In response to this, someone noted that audio and video devices are used in art museums to assist patrons in appreciating visual art—and the observation was made that changes of technology have happened over and over, and creative people use them in creative ways.

On the other hand, visual art is and always has been a vehicle for communication, so modern intervention of "acoustiguides" telling viewers what

a work of art means may cause a decline in artistic responsiveness. But to carry that argument too far could lead to claiming film is a lower form of art—which may be true sometimes, but film can also be a quite elevating form of art. It was suggested that television also used to have artistic elements, but seems over time to have declined as an art—from scripted dramas to sitcoms to reality TV. In this regard, Bradbury's view of consumerism driving television content may be accurate.

In conclusion, readers seemed to agree that *Fahrenheit 451* offered very interesting ideas for discussion, but was less rich in terms of literary technique than some of our other selections, and therefore to some degree ultimately disappointing.

Discussion closed at 10 p.m., and the meeting wound up with the usual final round of refreshments and conversation.