

Mildred Montag

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Bradbury and Television: *Fahrenheit 451* and Four-Screen Rooms

In 1953, when science fiction writer Ray Bradbury published his novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, Americans were struggling with growing concerns about the potential dangers of communism. Despite having recovered from threats posed by Nazi Germany and her allies, Americans were fearful that censorship and book burning had become a reality at home. Senator Joseph McCarthy had raised the specter of censorship and was publicly naming people he branded as communists. Although the novel focuses primarily on the consequences of censorship and book burning, Bradbury also examines a secondary theme that may, in fact, be more relevant today: how obsession with television can diminish human intelligence, shape a country's value system, and promote conformity. Bradbury perceived that the growing attraction of television would have a negative impact on America.

Ironically, when Bradbury published *Fahrenheit 451*, televisions were scarce in American households. *American Century* reports that "home television ownership . . . exploded in the post-war boom years of the 1950s. While only around 9% of Americans owned TV's in 1950, by 1960 that figure had jumped above 80%." Despite Bradbury's predictions of television walls in every home, only a small percentage of households in the US actually had televisions in 1953.

Within a decade, however, almost every home in America had access to television and other devices that make frequent or constant viewing a real possibility. Yang reports that in 2019 the average American home had 2.86 television sets. He notes that "a whopping 31% of households have more than 4 television sets." While this number may seem high, Yang also points out that additional devices like computers, tablets, and phones significantly increase exposure to media productions. His research indicates that the "average American watches 3 hours and 46 minutes of TV each day."

Bradbury's main character, Guy Montag, whose job is to incinerate any books he finds, illustrates the author's concerns about the influence of television on individuals and marriages. Montag, who is attracted to books and reading and finds wall screens annoying and distracting, contrasts dramatically with his wife Mildred, who seems to lack intelligence and awareness. Early in the novel, Montag comes home to find Mildred comatose on their bed. She has taken too many sleeping pills and has been lulled into a coma-like state by constant listening to broadcasts through ear plugs called Seashells:

And in her ears the little Seashells, the thimble radios tamped tight, and an electronic ocean of sound, of music and talk and music and talk coming in, coming in on the shore of her unsleeping mind . . . . Every night the waves came in and bore her off on their great tides of sound, floating her, wide-eyed, toward morning. There had been no night in the last two years that Mildred had not swum in that sea, had not gladly gone down for the third time. (8)

Montag's efforts to talk with Mildred about things he feels are important are thwarted by her inability to move from the fictional world of the wall screens to real-life conversation. She filters everything through fictional characters and stories and advertisements and game shows she watches non-stop throughout the day. Montag's boss, Captain Beatty, the fire chief, explains that citizens like Mildred are happiest when they are ignorant:

Give the people contests they win by remembering the words to more popular songs or the names of state capitals or how much corn Iowa grew last year. . . chock them so damned full of 'facts' they feel stuffed, but absolutely `brilliant' with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy, because facts of that sort don't change. Don't give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy. (52)

In addition to taking a toll on individual intellectual activity and engagement, excessive television has transformed human experience into mindless, repetitive episodes and game shows. In Bradbury's fictional town, there are no identifiable cultural experiences. Most households have massive television sets embedded into their walls that create their realities. All shared experiences are scripted and broadcast via the wall

screens. Instead of experiencing life, Mildred, the average American wife, lives by a script and participates in the television dramas as if they were her own experiences. She explains to Montag that she spends her day reading her lines from a script she receives ahead of time:

Well, this is a play comes on the wall-to-wall circuit in ten minutes. They mailed me my part this morning. I sent in some box-tops. They write the script with one part missing. It's a new idea. The home-maker, that's me, is the missing part. When it comes time for the missing lines, they all look at me out of the three walls and I say the lines. . . . (15)

When Montag asks her what the play is about, she says, "... these people named Bob and Ruth and Helen" (15). The scripts do not capture any social or cultural experiences that reflect community values and history; instead, they are comprised of meaningless conversations.

Neither Mildred nor her friends value being individuals. Mildred wants to be like everyone else. She reminds Montag of the urgency of having a fourth wall installed in their living room:

It'll be even more fun when we can afford to have the fourth wall installed. How long you figure before we save up and get the fourth wall torn out and a fourth wall-TV put in? . . . . If we had a fourth wall, why it'd be just like this room wasn't ours at all, but all kinds of exotic people's rooms. We could do without a few things. (15-16)

Mildred and her friends do not separate fiction and fantasy from reality. When Montag stays home sick after having stolen books from a house he burned, he argues with her to turn off the broadcast so they can talk. However, she is more interested in the broadcasts that call her by name, thanks to their "converter attachment," a gadget that cost one hundred dollars and automatically inserts her name when the announcer speaks. Mildred, who does not have to reply to the announcer, has lost the capacity to have real conversation. Montag questions whether or not there is anything meaningful in their shared life:

Well, wasn't there a wall between him and Mildred, when you came down to it? Literally not just one, wall but, so far, three! And expensive, too! And the uncles, the aunts, the cousins, the nieces, the nephews, that lived in those walls, the gibbering pack of tree-apes that said

nothing, nothing, nothing and said it loud, loud, loud. He had taken to calling them relatives from the very first. "How's Uncle Louis today?" "Who?" "And Aunt Maude?" . . . No matter when he came in, the walls were always talking to Mildred. (37)

Scholars and social critics agree that Bradbury believed technology had the capacity to negatively affect both the human intellect and the human spirit. Cochran writes that Bradbury saw social forces at work that negatively impacted the human ability to think critically. He feared political suppression of dissent and dreaded the evolution of a culture that celebrated the physical rather than the cerebral. Sommers writes that "Bradbury was really writing about . . . the effects . . . mass media like television, film, and other media will have on the populace: shortening attention spans . . . resulting in a populace that lost not just its interest in seeking the truth, but its *ability* to do so."

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