

# A Reader-Author Conflict: How We Disagree with Bradbury on Fahrenheit 451

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“It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed.” These dramatic lines hit us hard when we first open *Fahrenheit 451*. As we continue to read, the book challenges our opinions about our social and political environment. To be honest, *Fahrenheit 451* holds a great potential to be a life-changing book thanks to the topics it addresses. At first, the subject matter in the book seems obvious: censorship. Yet *Fahrenheit 451* is a book packed with symbols; these symbols allow a multi-faceted, rich reading experience and create a space for different interpretations. The interesting part is that Bradbury’s thoughts about the book’s main idea are surprisingly different from and less political than most readers’. In fact, he related the book with the dangers of television. But does the main theme affect the worth of the book? Or do the interpretations of the writer really matter once a book is published? What do all these say about the book “*Fahrenheit 451*” as a whole? It might be beneficial to answer these questions in order to deepen the understanding of one of the most controversial books of all time.

“*Fahrenheit 451* is not; he says firmly, a story about government censorship. Nor was it a response to Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose investigations had already instilled fear and stifled the creativity of thousands... Bradbury, a man, living in the creative and industrial center of reality TV and one-hour dramas, says it is, in fact, a story about how television destroys interest in reading literature” Or so wrote LA Weekly’s Johnston in a 2007 article on Ray Bradbury. [\(1\)](#) The idea expressed here by Bradbury is baffling, to say the least. Most people take *Fahrenheit 451* to be a story about government censorship told from the lens of a dystopian future to state that it is actually about how dangerous television seems to degrade the content of the book simply. Indeed, nowadays, we are very likely to think that government censorship is a more “highbrow” concept than a simple “TV bad”. Naturally, it

feels as if Bradbury is downgrading the literary component of his own book by saying the subject matter was the addictive and stupefying effect of television on the public.

Still, we must keep in mind that even though every criticism of television has been killed at least thrice over in our current time, the television was still a novel addition to most people's lives at the time of Bradbury's writing the book. An argument does not simply gain merit by being the first of its kind, but it should be noted that the topic at hand was not associated with the staleness we currently feel from it. It is unfair to say that the book is not a good novel if it is really meant to be about television rather than government censorship. Perhaps it has not stood the test of time as well as *Don Quixote*, but it still has an enormous reader count and is one of the most influential works of its time. The same could hardly be accomplished if a writer set out with the same ideas in their mind today, so we have to cut Bradbury at least some slack. However, yet again, an argument does not simply gain merit by being the first of its kind. The truth of the matter is that *Fahrenheit 451* carries as much depth and literary flair as an average episode of *Black Mirror* does. The comparison with *Black Mirror* also works on the level that both deal with warnings of a dystopian future in a very childish manner.

If we put Bradbury's own comments about his book aside, many people consider *Fahrenheit 451* as a book mostly about politics. The first impression that the book makes on the reader is that the author, Ray Bradbury, decried authoritarian governments by allegorizing their actions. The context that the book was written in reinforces this interpretation. After two world wars, with the impact of rising tensions between the USSR and the USA, there was a clash of ideologies. In the USA, anything that is slightly related to communism or considered so by the government could cause people trouble. Censor was a commonly used method in the fight that the US waged on communism. Considering these, readers understandably think that censorship was the main problem that Bradbury based his book upon. The whole book is about burning books; books are maybe the most important means to express ideas. They enable people to see new perspectives and consequently encourages them to think and question authority. Authoritarian governments do not like their ideas being questioned; therefore, censoring books is one of their weapons. Influenced by that, *Fahrenheit 451* is thought to be a demonstration of what censorship can lead to. In a world without books -an extreme case of censorship-, people cannot make sense of their surroundings and what is happening around them. Life is monotone; like in the case of Mildred, Guy's wife, many have no reason to live. On the other hand, the government can preserve its power because of the apathy of the people caused by a lack of awareness due to not reading. This is the reason why Liberals embraced this book as a critique of authoritarian policies that are trying to limit people's access to information to stay in control. However, Bradbury's intention was quite different from what people take from the book, according to himself.

We have made clear the divide between Bradbury's thoughts and the readers' thoughts on the subject of the book, but we have to ask one question: Do any of these thoughts even matter? Surely, the thoughts of the readers do matter, maybe not to one another, but their thoughts matter to themselves and pertain directly to their experience of consuming *Fahrenheit 451*. The experience of consuming a book is what defines it, so surely the thoughts of the ones consuming the book are crucial. The thoughts of others can also be part of the experience, though. By hearing the views of others, the consumer can gain newfound insight into the book, and their experience with the book can continue to grow

even after they have finished reading it. The main thing to keep in mind here is that the external opinion has to come from someone who has at least partially consumed the content in question. Otherwise, their view is automatically invalid and cannot contribute to the experience of another consumer. In the same vein, one only has to have consumed the content in question for their view to be valid; after all, even most ignorant person's view could change how even the most well-read consumer will reinterpret the words of the book, thus having engaged with the content is a necessary and sufficient condition for your thoughts on the said content to matter.

Notice that we have not mentioned the author as having any qualitative difference from an average reader. That is indeed the case. A reader's relationship with a book is solely based on the mind of the reader and words adorning the pages of the book; the thoughts of the writer do not matter; after all, the writer cannot telepathically change the words on their book after it has been published. Any thoughts they have after that point is not different from the interpretation of a simple reader. The main point is that since the writer's own thoughts are no more important than the tens of thousands of others floating around the intellectual environment of the book, there can be no one true interpretation of the work. As Barthes put it in his ubiquitous 1967 essay *Death of The Author*, "Once the Author is gone, the claim to "decipher" a text becomes quite useless." (2) So, since the discourse on government censorship dominates the intellectual sphere surrounding *Fahrenheit 451*, *Fahrenheit 451* must be a book about government censorship if it is to be a book about anything. There certainly is no true answer to the subject of *Fahrenheit 451*, though, no matter how much importance you might place on the words of the author. In fact, I'll take the argument one step further. Since the validity of one's opinion as an external agent depends on their level of intimacy with the content in question, one might be inclined to think that the writer would have the most valid opinions. However, I disagree. The author carries many ideas that did not make it into the book, many turns and twists in the story that no longer pertain to the book published, and more words not in the pages than there are words printed in the book. All this burden effectively puts a barrier between the author and the finished work, and in the end, they are *less* qualified to put out a valid interpretation than the average reader!

Another interesting point about *Fahrenheit 451* is that people hold quite diverse opinions about it. While there is a strong fan base that thinks the book is iconic and deep, some people argue that it is superficial and overrated. Frankly, the idea behind the book is pretty striking; the connection to the burning of the library of Alexandria and the whole discrediting intellectuals and promoting ignorance theme are very much intriguing. Whether the main theme is censorship or television's harmful effects, the starting point of Bradbury is stimulating. However, the question is: Could Bradbury successfully fill the background of these themes with the plot, symbols, and characters? The book's biggest criticism can be related to the difference between Bradbury's explanation of what the book is about and the reader's understanding of it. If the writer needs to clarify the motivations he had while he was writing the book, can that book be considered successful? It is really strange that Bradbury felt an urge to explain that *Fahrenheit 451* was misunderstood; this behavior of Bradbury, in a way, creates an antipathy against the book. The plot's weakness to support the metaphors that Bradbury tried to create also prevents the reader from "getting the actual message" as nearly nothing significant happens throughout the book. Also, the characters are hard to relate to. For instance, Guy Montag is too distant to be the main character. This is not an actual problem maybe but when the reader cannot sympathize with the characters, it decreases the book's

impact. There are a lot of filler characters, too; they come, do something, and get lost, but they do not impact the course of events specifically. Even Clarisse, who is supposed to be the turning point in the book, is dull and dies without a reason or a remarkable consequence when her mission in the book is done. Another reason why *Fahrenheit 451* split its readers is the dry writing style. Some believe the dryness is intentional because Bradbury wants to represent the erosion of culture with it, and some argue that it is just the literary incompetence of Bradbury. Both ways, it makes the book a bit hard to read. When compared to its counterparts, *1984* and *Brave New World*, it draws attention that the dystopian world of *Fahrenheit 451* is not as elaborative and well-planned as theirs. The other two are also hard to read, but they offer a deeper reading experience. In short, the problem with *Fahrenheit 451* starts with the fact that the idea behind the book and the writing is not equally well executed. Even though it is an important book, it falls short when it comes to satiating the readers who want more complex things.

There is a final and trivial topic to be discussed before we can come to a proper conclusion in this article. Namely, does television actually have a stupefying effect on people watching it? The usual way to answer this question would be to perhaps list all the arguments for and against the claim and then try to evaluate which side presents a more valid view using scientific studies and general reasoning. However, this has been done at least a million times, and the answer is almost always "Probably not, but it does not hurt to be careful.", with people arguing that transformations in our societies are tied to human nature much more significantly than they are tied to advances in technology. I think this is a good enough assessment of the subject at hand, so I will simply note that it is reasonable and try to contextualize the hatred towards the television.

You might have heard that Socrates, or Plato, it is hard to deem which one of them is the original author of any quote, especially because Plato loved using the voice of Socrates to explain his own views, complained about the practice of writing in his time, claiming that it would make people less reliant on their memory, and thus, might be detrimental to people. There really are accounts of such a quote, [\(3\)](#) which means that people were against, or at least wary of, the written word as it was being popularized. Now, let us take a jump forward of about two and a half millennia and visit our present time. Relatively recently, the tv, as mentioned earlier, series depicting a variety of dystopian futures, *Black Mirror*, came into the spotlight as one of the most controversial series in memory. Some people simply loved the theme and the message, others detested the abysmal writing, and many people came to talk about its subject matters in a short time. *Black Mirror* mostly "warned" humanity of the logical extremes of the most recent technologies, things like smartphone GPS systems and home assistants like Alexa. But that was very much its downfall; it was very easy to recognize that the show was very much a product of its time and did not deal with an existential crisis caused by the technology of the times; after all, it was easy to see that *Black Mirror* would deal with the dangers of the television if it came out 60 years earlier, and maybe the dangers of writing if it came out 2500 years earlier. I imagine for a lot of people. It cemented the idea that being scared of new technology and thinking new conveniences will bring about the downfall of society is a common occurrence. Maybe our own worries about technology are not so based in reality as much as they are based on fear. After all, writing did not destroy civilization.

I do not mean to say any and all concerns about developing technology are wrong of course, but we have to understand how those concerns change as time passes. Perhaps Ray Bradbury had a few points worth considering, but his argument was mostly constructed from the fear endemic to the period he was living in as he was working on his book. And perhaps there are arguments that claim television does indeed make people more ignorant or less intelligent, which are not totally invalid. Still, we have to understand both the scientific and logical unlikelihood of the validity of such arguments and how they are almost always constructed from periodic fears rather than accurate and unbiased observations of the current dynamics of the societies we live in.

All in all, we cannot say that *Fahrenheit 451* carries no merits at all. After all, is said and done, there are still hordes of fans of the book worldwide, and it has gained the accolade to stand among the likes of *1984* and *Brave New World*. Even though we may criticize its various literary lackings and especially the supposed subject matter as expressed by the author, we cannot deny that it managed to grasp success, at least partially. Perhaps, we too would have been more lenient towards the book had we been born fifty years ago. Yet, all people are bound by the Zeitgeist, whether it be the authors of this article or the author of the book that this article discusses. In Bradbury's case, however, he was a little too bound by his time's sensitivities and thought processes. Combined with his literary ineptitude, perhaps it was inevitable that he would reconcile his thoughts with the interpretations of those who read the book decades later. In any case, our final verdict is that, despite the comments of its author, the book should still be considered a book about government censorship, and an average one at that.