

Reading Ray Bradbury's Literary Libraries

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The library was the greenhouse in which I, a very strange plant indeed, grew up, exploding with seeds. (Ray Bradbury)

In interviews discussing his sense of authorship, Ray Bradbury frequently proclaimed himself to be self-educated in libraries. Growing up, Bradbury had access to two personal libraries, that of his Aunt Neva, which contained the Oz books, and that of his Uncle Bion, which featured Edgar Rice Burroughs. In these family libraries he discovered his passion for “primitive authors.” Later on he was able to access the Waukegan Town Library for volumes of Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. G. Wells, which he regarded as the primary influences on his science-fiction writing (Aggelis 52-53). What is more, seeing books by these same authors lined up on the shelves of the public library, he longed to see his own books alongside theirs. Personal communion with books in a library setting is in fact well attested in literary history, though some have doubted that anything like a real dialogue goes on between author and reader (Basbanes 100). But for Bradbury, literary books were people, or at least there was always a person to consider behind the book. When asked by John Huston to write the screenplay for Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Bradbury practiced a kind of conjuration of Melville, reading different passages at random to help him decide. He recommended the process for others: “This is how we find our friends-for-life on the bookshelves. We recognize our kinship almost immediately with this quick test” (Aggelis 28). Bradbury did not realize it at the time, but his response to Melville was conditioned in part by Shakespeare, who influenced Melville’s revisions of the book.

But as he matured as a writer, Bradbury cannot have been ignorant of the fact that several of the masters of literature he grew to admire—Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Cervantes, Thomas Wolfe, and Jorge Luis Borges (who wrote a preface to *The Martian Chronicles*)—invented libraries in their writings, or at least, in the case of Wolfe, wrote about their harrowing experiences in

labyrinthine libraries. It is not surprising, then, given Bradbury's lifelong self-description of himself as a "library person," that an array of imaginary libraries would figure prominently in his works. In this chapter, I want to "read" Bradbury's libraries, examining his enthusiasm as well as his anxieties about them. Despite the joys of personhood and personal affinity to be discovered in reading, Bradbury also was keenly aware from early in his career of the perishability of books and the dangers of their becoming sacramental and sacrificial objects in a process of scapegoating. In fact, some of the earliest images of books that we see in Bradbury's writings are not of books as the bearers of interior experience but as perishable physical objects, as metaphorical bodies struggling in the fires of censorship. Indeed, images of book burnings, and the destruction of libraries, provide some of the darkest moments of his writings (Touponce 109-37).

In what follows I borrow as a guide certain categories from Matthew Battles's intriguing cultural history of libraries, which argues that people can become the authors of libraries. Battles's discourse establishes a broadly useful distinction between the Parnassan library and the universal library. In the Parnassan library "the works within it are a distillation, the essence of all that is Good and Beautiful, or Holy. It is meant as a model for the universe, a closely orchestrated collection of ideals. In a universal library by contrast, they are texts, fabrics to be shredded and woven together in new combinations and patterns" (Battles 9). We will have occasion to visit Battles's book throughout this chapter because of his historical understanding of the darker moments that books endure in their physical form, what Battles calls "biblioclasm," that is, the destruction of books taking many historical forms, some deliberate and some accidental, and not just by fire, though that is the most common form (Battles 42). There is no doubt that Bradbury deeply felt some of the historical events mentioned by Battles, especially the Nazi books burnings (Battles 165). As we will see, Bradbury, for all his ideal reveries about books, also manifests anxieties about their nature as texts.

I will be concerned primarily with Bradbury's works in which collections of books play a major role: *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), *Death Is a Lonely Business* (1985), and "Somewhere a Band Is Playing" (2007). But first some remarks about Bradbury's acknowledged classic of science fiction, *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), where books and libraries in their absence have an almost spectral effect on our reading.

The distinction between ideal book and malleable text that is so prominent in Bradbury's later works is already operative in this work. Never consciously planned as a novel, *The Martian Chronicles* is actually a short story cycle based on his earlier pulp stories, with added bridge passages. For publication Bradbury subjected some of the stories to intense literary revision, and arranged them in an archetypal pattern. The result is a classic of modern science fiction, but also a kaleidoscopic text that he was still revising and updating as late as 1997 for the Avon hardcover releases of his major works.

Bradbury of course wanted to keep his books in hardcover editions, suggesting the idea of permanence, but he kept changing the text—it now includes "The Fire Balloons" and removes "Way in the Middle of the Air"—as well as updating the chronology. Indeed, the dust cover picture of the Morrow edition, by Tim O'Brien, points to the tension between the Parnassan and the universal conceptions of the book. This edition appears to depict the Martian book as a clothbound hardcover with some of its paper pages browned, bent, and cracked. A human hand, index finger extended, touches its pictograms. In reading *The Martian Chronicles*, however, we soon discover the Martian books were millennia old and made of precious metal, silver. When touched by a Martian hand, one of them is described as emitting a soft ancient voice that sings of heroic times in the early days of the planet (Bradbury, *Martian Chronicles* 2). Bradbury's Martian books are clearly Parnassan, pointing to an ideal order. Only as such could they survive the cultural catastrophe of disease the Earthmen bring to the planet. But ironically, Bradbury's own metaphor for the experience of Mars, the kaleidoscope, is one that belongs to the idea of a universal library open to a constantly changing textuality (Bradbury, *Martian Chronicles* 109).

Elsewhere in *The Martian Chronicles* we find images of the human-borne disease of chicken pox as having a strange effect on Martian bodies, burning them black and turning them into brittle flakes (69). It is clearly being suggested to our imaginations that their bodies are like burned books. Firemen then come to burn out the dead cities of infection, so if the Martian books do not burn, then at least we get the suggestion that the Martians themselves were subject to a holocaust. As a result of this holocaust the land is left haunted, as the Earthmen first entering the Martian cities discover. They enter the city whispering in hushed tones, “for it was like entering a vast open library or a mausoleum” (77). Spender, the Earthman archaeologist who identifies with Martian culture, claims to have discovered “how to read a book,” a slow process of interior self-discovery that is the antithesis of the sped-up, crassly material mass culture of Earth. As Battles points out, public libraries are “among the chief protectors of intellectual individuality and privacy” (Battles 68). In the haunted libraries of Mars this seems to be what Spender is rediscovering about the nature of books and reading. In a period when public libraries were under attack, Bradbury reaffirms the public library as a site of reverie.

In contrast to the Martian city as an open public library, “Usher II” revolves around the traumatic memory of an extensive biblioclasm on Earth that destroyed all works of fantasy and horror in America, referred to as the Great Fire. The private library of the main character, Stendahl, which included fifty thousand works of imagination, was destroyed during this conflagration, along with all other libraries like it. A wealthy man, Stendahl had collected books that resisted the dominant trend of realism in the arts, and tried to counter their claims of “escapism.” He thus was the author of a counter-library. Bradbury’s story provides a catalog of some of the books burned, and presumably held by Stendahl, in a bibliographical reverie (Bradbury, *Martian Chronicles* 164-65).¹ He has rebuilt Poe’s House of Usher on Mars as a “haunted house” entertainment seemingly to memorialize the victims of the Great Fire. But its real purpose is to murder the officials who are sustaining the censorship, with its emphasis on realism, in ways described by Poe’s stories.

The story is complexly intertextual. It opens with Poe's own opening to "The Fall of the House of Usher," and closes with Poe's words as well. Along the way, Stendahl requires Garrett, the pompous Investigator of Moral Climates, to say the exact words of Fortunato in Poe's story, "The Cask of Amontillado," as he entombs him in the sinking *House of Usher*.

"Usher II" rather directly reflects the historical moment of postwar censorship in the United States, which later culminated in the Army-McCarthy hearings on suspected Communists in the government and the arts in 1954. Another fear of the postwar years was atomic war. "There Will Come Soft Rains" takes place on Earth in the aftermath of a nuclear conflagration, in which a house catches fire and burns. Sara Teasdale's titular poem is recited with great effect, since all the humans who once lived in the house are now dead, reminding us of the perishability of the literary work, no matter the medium in which it is recorded. I don't propose to discuss here every story in detail, but the concluding story of *The Martian Chronicles*, "The Million-Year Picnic," which was the first of the stories to be published (*Planet Stories*, Summer 1946), contains a biblioclasm that is worth dwelling on for a moment. In this story, which is told from a child's point of view, we see a family of survivors from Earth making their way along the Martian canals exploring their new world, but not before the father destroys their rocket, and any thought of returning to Earth. To warm his family in the cool Martian night, he creates a fire in which he burns the remnants of Earth's universal library. It is described as "the cremation of innumerable words" (266). However, this is not the destruction of literary works, but what the universal library allowed to compete with them: business graphs, sociological essays on religious prejudice and the problems of political unity, stock reports, *The War Digest*—"factual" writings of all sorts. We get the sense that this fire, far from being traumatic, is burning away a former way of life, and is enabling the ultimate escape.

Fahrenheit 451 (1953), with its cover painting by Joe Mugnaini, became Bradbury's best-known book. The cover of the paperback first edition is a self-referential image of biblioclasm, with the figure

of the Fireman catching fire himself while standing in the flames. Books and newspapers and magazines are joined together in the conflagration, so we know that the image alludes to the universal library with its democratic goal of informing the public. The newspaper pages no doubt are meant to symbolize the powers of the free press, which have died out with the government's connivance by the time in which Bradbury's novel is set. But curiously the Fireman is also dressed in what appears to be the armor of a knight, in paper armor. In October 2002, while attending a rehearsal of the stage play of *Fahrenheit 451*, I had the opportunity to ask Bradbury personally about this incongruous armor. He told me that it was meant to allude to Don Quixote, a figure of mad idealism if ever there was one. So the painting also alludes to another literary biblioclasm in which a personal library was burned, for in Cervantes's novel, Don Quixote's well-meaning friends burn his library in a last-ditch attempt to cure his madness.

My reading of the painting is guided by the master trope of personification, as indeed is all literary reading in which a holocaust of books is witnessed, as Ann Hungerford suggests (7). But in what specific ways are books people? Bradbury has the reader discover the answer to this question by creating a hero, Montag, himself a Fireman whose job it is to burn books, clandestinely rediscover their meanings. Montag begins stealing books from the burnings of private libraries. These burnings have an air of carnival fun about them, but begin to get serious when a woman decides to burn with her collection. Montag has to wonder what could be in books to make a person want to die with them. To put it in intellectual terms, unlike other physical objects, literary books have an interior space and time, an imaginary world into which I can enter. Furthermore, when I read such a book, I am thinking the thoughts of another human being—a point effectively made by the many quotes and allusions used in Bradbury's novel—and I am experiencing the values of the implied author. At one point Fire Chief Beatty tries to intervene and prevent Montag's becoming an author of his own library. He explains to Montag the dangers and temptations of such

a project, which he admits he himself has felt (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* 50-57).

But Beatty's intervention fails. About halfway through the novel, Montag stages a reading of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (91). It summarizes much of what he has experienced in authoring his small collection of books, which he naïvely imagines is almost complete. Arnold subscribed to a liberal ideal of radiant literacy. He conceived of culture as a pursuit of our total perfection based in part on our getting to know the best that has been thought and spoken in the past, his famous "Touchstones." Furthermore, for Arnold, culture meant criticism, especially when these touchstones are applied to the present; without it, man remains a creature limited by self-satisfaction. This ideal of culture and criticism is surely Bradbury's own as the novel's implied author, for he makes Arnold's poem, perhaps the most familiar in the English language, resonate in new ways. Unlike the debased romanticism of the five-minute romance, Arnold's poem definitely does not have a happy ending. Instead, the reverie of the Sea of Faith evokes melancholy for a lost cultural center. Furthermore, the speaker of Arnold's poem laments the state of the world and the possibilities for communication in it, a world which seems to lie before him like a land of dreams but that really has neither joy, nor love, nor peace in it. The people in Montag's living room have not thought of any of these things in a long, long time, if ever. But Bradbury is implicitly telling us, not so much through intellect as through feeling, that as long as we remember one poem from the best of our literature, then the effects of mass culture, which threaten to erase our memory of families, friends, and even the fear of war, will find it more difficult to settle in.

Beatty makes a second visit to Montag's home and initiates in a reduced and more virulent form the eighteenth century Battle of the Books (Battles 82-116). However, instead of being a restaging of the battle between Ancients and Moderns, between the Parnassan and the universal library, it takes the form of a mock battle of citations, in which books are seen as bringing melancholy into the world because they can only disagree among themselves. When Montag later kills Beatty, he realizes that Beatty is inwardly suicidal. Montag escapes

into the wilderness, deciding to live among the outcast book people, becoming part of the book that would have had a secure place in any library in previous centuries down to our own: the Bible. Montag remembers parts of Ecclesiastes, a book of wisdom. Classical myths play an important role, too, in the story of Antaeus and the story of the Phoenix that are retold in the book. Thus the Parnassan library is upheld and affirmed, but in fragmentary social circumstances that are less than ideal.

We have to wait until 1962 and the publication of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* to find another full-blown literary library. Concerning this work Bradbury has said that he wanted to write a “secret book,” a scary book, one about boys and their secret worlds that would take its place on library shelves alongside the classics he knew growing up (Aggelis 52-53). In my opinion it is without question his finest literary library, pushing the figuration of language to new heights. Here we find a recognizably modern universal library, which besides literary books contains many informational items: newspaper files, “old folios,” and so on. But the dream of communing with a single book that we find in *Fahrenheit 451* and earlier works is extended to the library itself. What we find is the notion of the library as a vast body that breathes its books in and out: “it’s a world, complete and uncompletable, and it’s filled with secrets...so the library is a body, too, the pages of books pressed together like organs in the darkness” (Battles 5-6).

As a body, the public library becomes the main location for the struggle between Charles Halloway, the aged janitor who works in it, and Mr. Dark, the proprietor of the invading evil carnival. Mr. Dark, also known as the the Illustrated Man, is also a kind of readable body. The multitudinous images tattooed on his body cry out for interpretation and understanding. Thus the library provides a special interpretive space for the novel’s meanings, becoming the place where the inverted carnival can be understood. The carnival needs interpretation because instead of being the traditional place where the seriousness of official culture can be mocked, the carnival has itself become a secret form of domination and oppression. This interpretive activity takes place at night, after library business hours,

and thus it, too, is in tune with the “secret places” tone of the whole novel. In fact, the library is a darkly ambivalent place after hours, haunted by the past, compared to a catacomb, a mausoleum, or a labyrinth. Will Halloway and Jim Nightshade, the boy protagonists of the novel, returning after their adventures in the town, are afraid to talk too loudly for fear of raising up “phantom twins” of their own voices along its echoing corridors of shelves (Bradbury, *Something Wicked* 189).

Because he intuitively understands that the carnival has its own time and space—it is a literary chronotope—Halloway designs a literary clock with the book’s titular lines at the center. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* with its witches at the center, surrounded by works featuring the supernatural and the occult surrounding them, including Dr. Faustus, give him a spatial orientation. Halloway soon discovers that he has a face for the clock, but not the hands. He does not know what hour of the “the night of life” it is for the boys and himself. He has to face the Illustrated Man not knowing how close he may be to death.

Halloway’s interpretation takes shape in a remarkable series of rhetorical and figurative chapters that conclude the second part of the novel, Chapters 37 to 44. It begins with an analysis of old newspapers reporting the arrival of Cooger and Dark’s carnival in previous eras. To understand how these “autumn people” thrive, Halloway recites a passage from a religious tract by a certain Pastor Newgate Phillips that he read as a boy, explaining that among human beings there are those attracted to the dark seasons of life. When asked by his son if they, then, are summer people, Halloway responds by saying that most people are “half and half,” explaining that he himself lived in libraries around the country because he liked being alone: “I liked matching up in books what I had seen on the roads” (193).

This has led some interpreters of the novel to assume that Bradbury is suggesting a Christian allegory of sin and redemption. In fact, there is a lot of referencing of the notion of sin in Halloway’s discourse, and the Bible figures prominently in one scene. However, the religious tract and its author are completely imaginary, invented by Bradbury for his own literary purposes. The tract is not present

as a text on the literary clock but instead is recited from memory. As I mentioned, the interpretation Halloway offers us explores the notion of the carnival as a body, developing a materialist notion of sin, guilt, and interiority as the “nightmare fuel” on which the carnival feeds. The body metaphor really becomes dominant in Chapter 40, where the human soul is figured as a kind of material body that oxidizes need, want, and desire. Through his analysis of the carnival’s descent, Halloway is able, in a rambling sort of way, to intuit that the people who join the carnival, abandoning wives, husbands, and friends, have lost contact with the social body. In Halloway’s interpretation—which he stresses is incomplete and subject to a lot of guesswork—the carnival becomes their new body, and the freaks can be read as ironic inscriptions on it. The mirror maze transforms these selfish people who want a “change of body, change of personal environment” into living images of their “original sins.” The primary sin is narcissism and not bothering to form common causes with others. For instance, the lightning rod salesman, whom the boys meet at the beginning of the novel, is mentioned as someone who never stays around with others to face the storms. The carnival turns him into a Dwarf, “a mean ball of grotesque tripes, all self-involved” (206).

Gradually Halloway learns how to read the body of the carnival. The crowds depicted on the Illustrated Man’s body, though they seem to the boys to constitute an exciting body full of life, actually lack one crucial element: They are not really free. They are his slaves, deformed figures masked by their own sins. A key word in understanding their situation is *spectator*, for the inked spectators are contrary to the participatory life of carnival in which all must join. Mr. Dark needs them to be spectators to feed his enormous ego. However, when Halloway does finally confront Mr. Dark, intellectual understanding is not enough to defeat him. In fact, he scoffs at Halloway’s attempt to scare him with the Bible, easily taking it from him and tossing it in the wastebasket. Mr. Dark retrieves his “two precious books” from the library shelves and leaves Halloway in the hands of the Gypsy Dust Witch who is going to stop his heart.

What will defeat the carnival, then? The answer to this question is provided by Halloway's reading and interpretation of another body, that of the Gypsy Dust Witch, whose grotesque face and blind tickling behavior makes Halloway laugh. When the Dust Witch draws back in fear at his laughter, he begins to understand the true and proper carnival body, which accepts the grotesque and fearful things of life with amusement. Here is the place for the reader to remember Shakespeare's witches and their mocking words, so vague yet so immense, for they are indeed the very "heart" of Halloway's apprehension, lying at the center of his literary clock. Life now seems an immense prank played on us by fate, a foolish joke. Armed with these insights and reversals of values, Halloway defeats the evil carnival with harmonica playing and dancing and, with the help of Will and Jim, killing the Illustrated Man, now changed into a boy, with fatherly kindness.

The laughter at darkly oppressive things that Bradbury discovered in carnival is operative in his later writings too. It makes its appearance in his detective novel, *Death Is a Lonely Business* (1985), which is also an oblique autobiography of his early years as a struggling writer in Venice, California. A. L. Shrank, the psychologist who owns a private library of end-of-the world books and pessimistic tomes of all sorts—Freud, and the philosophers Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are mentioned prominently—located on the fogbound Venice pier, is also a kind of carnival freak, a shrunken caricature of a human being compared to daguerreotype photos of Poe. His library consists of 5,910 books stacked from floor to ceiling. Bradbury finds himself laughing at the titles. He banters with Shrank, offering this "meadow doctor of lost souls" (52) a more optimistic and hopeful listing of titles. Several of these titles contain words such as *sun*, *sunshine*, or *summertime*. It is important to understand that Shrank is not just another grotesque character on the Venice pier that is in the process of being torn down. On the contrary, Shrank's library is a figuration of Bradbury's creative anxieties at this point in his career. His books represent an intellectually pessimistic way of seeing the world that threatens to choke off Bradbury's creative endeavors. Furthermore, Shrank is a

“shrink,” a representative of psychoanalytic culture that threatens to excoriate his dreams. Having his own lonely side, Bradbury is deeply attracted to Shrank’s offer of intellectual bibliotherapy but resists it throughout the novel, even in his dreams. As it happens, Bradbury discovers that Shrank is also the killer at loose in the novel. Shrank’s library is demolished in a nightmare biblioclasm, his books floating off into the ocean. Shrank himself drowns in a submerged lion cage at the novel’s end.

Bradbury’s last literary library is wrapped in the mysteries of a writer’s community, called Summerton, living in a small town in the Arizona desert. Indeed, we feel in retrospect that “Somewhere a Band Is Playing” (2007) could have been one of those sunny books Bradbury offered to A. L. Shrank. As Bradbury explains in the introduction to the novella, the story had its partial genesis in his viewing David Lean’s romantic film *Summertime* (1955), set in Venice, Italy, and starring Katharine Hepburn, whom he later knew personally. As such, it is a book saturated with nostalgia for the genteel America of the first decade of the twentieth century, before the Great War. Journalist James Cardiff comes to Summerton in an attempt to uncover its mysteries, in particular why everyone lives so long, and why there are no children. He finds himself involved romantically with a beautiful woman named Nef, short for Nefertiti, the librarian of the Hope Memorial Library. In first touring the town, Cardiff had noticed that all of the private houses have inner library shelves visible in their bay windows. Summerton’s deepest secret turns out to be that it is an ancient community of genetic “sports,” which has gathered together and preserved lost texts and manuscripts by famous authors, protecting them with “absolute proof against fire,” from biblioclasm. Nef’s bibliographical reverie extends all the way backwards to the sacking of Troy, but also includes Poe’s final poem and Herman Melville’s last tale. In Summerton, works of literature are considered to be gifts that rouse their reader to a deeper understanding of life when scanned by a living eye, each book being a kind of Lazarus. With the notion of the work as a gift, which is also the gift of life, Bradbury’s last literary library could be called Parnassan because it gives testimony to the notion of the arts

as an ideal community lying outside commercial dealings (Hyde). One unresolved problem with this library, though, is that these gifts cannot be passed on to those living outside the community that guards them. It is implicit that such works cannot be commercially published. But in any case, in “Somewhere a Band Is Playing” Bradbury finally authored an imaginary library constructed by his summer people, rewriting some of the dark unquiet history of libraries.

Note

1. Bibliographical reveries can be found in other texts from this period, especially “Pillar of Fire” and “The Library,” collected in *A Pleasure to Burn* (Harper Perennial, 2011). Typically they take the form of a long catalog of beloved and personified books and characters in the process of being destroyed or under threat. They may, and often in Bradbury’s later writings do, include imaginary books.

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English Literature, Literary Theory, Linguistics, Film Theory, Media Theory, UGC NET JRF Exam Preparation, Novel Analysis, Research Papers Nasrullah Mambrol. Home American Literature Analysis of Ray Bradbury's Novels. Analysis of Ray Bradbury's Novels. By Nasrullah Mambrol on May 10, 2018 (0). Although Ray Bradbury (August 22, 1920 – June 5, 2012) became arguably the best-known American science-fiction writer, the majority of his work, which ranges from gothic horror to social criticism, centers on humanistic themes. His best works are powerful indictments of the dangers of unrestrained scientific and technological progress. However, his works also foster the hope that humanity will deal creatively with the new worlds it seems driven to create.

- 1 "Ray Bradbury", Florida Center for the Literary Arts, www.flcenterlitarts.com/big-read/big-read-online-press/ray-bradbury-portrait.jpg.
- 2 Robin Anne Reid, *Ray Bradbury: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000): 1, e-book, ebrary (Database).
- 3 "Fahrenheit 451: About the Author: Ray Bradbury (b. 1920)", National Endowment for the Arts, The Big Read, www.neabigread.org/books/fahrenheit451/fahrenheit451_04.php.

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Criticism of the Movie. Bould, Mark. Today would have been the 98th birthday of Ray Bradbury, the greatest sci-fi writer in history, who (by no small coincidence) also happened to know a thing or two about writing. Like many American children, I grew up on Bradbury's "The Veldt" remains my favorite of his stories "but as I became a writer myself I began to cherish not just the great author's work, but his attitude towards it. Bradbury loved writing. He took intense pleasure in it, and it shows on every page. This is, of course, not possible for everyone, but still, I find it to be a lovely antidote to all the hand-wringing and hair-