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News

Ray Bradbury: Fahrenheit 451 Misinterpreted

L.A.'s august Pulitzer honoree says it was never about censorship

By AMY E. BOYLE JOHNSTON

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(Illustration by Mr. Fish)

When the Pulitzer Prizes were handed out in May during a luncheon at Columbia University, two special citations were given. One went to John Coltrane (who died in 1967), the fourth time a jazz musician has been honored. The other went to Ray Bradbury, the first time a writer of science fiction and fantasy has been honored.

Bradbury, a longtime Los Angeles resident who leads an active civic life and even drops the *Los Angeles Times* letters to the editor on his views of what ails his town, did not attend, telling the Pulitzer board his doctor did not want him to travel.

But the real reason, he told the *L.A. Weekly*, had less to do with the infirmities of age (he turns 87 in August) than with the fact that recipients only shake hands with Lee C. Bollinger, Columbia University's president, and smile for a photograph.

He wanted to give a speech, but no remarks are allowed. "Not even a paragraph," he says with disdain.

In his pastel-yellow house in upscale Cheviot Hills, where he has lived for more than 50 years, Bradbury greeted me in his sitting room. He wore his now-standard outfit of a blue dress shirt with a white collar and a jack-o'-lantern tie (Halloween is his favorite day) and white socks. This ensemble is in keeping with Bradbury's arrested development. George Clayton Johnson, who gave us *Logan's Run*, says, "Ray has always been 14 going on 15."

Bradbury still has a lot to say, especially about how people do not understand his most literary work, *Fahrenheit 451*, published in 1953. It is widely taught in junior high and high schools and is for many students the first time they learn the names Aristotle, Dickens and Tolstoy.

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Now, Bradbury has decided to make news about the writing of his iconographic work and what he really meant. *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.

This, despite the fact that reviews, critiques and essays over the decades say that is precisely what it is all about. Even Bradbury's authorized biographer, Sam Weller, in *The Bradbury Chronicles*, refers to *Fahrenheit 451* as a book about censorship.

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.

"Television gives you the dates of Napoleon, but not who he was," Bradbury says, summarizing TV's content with a single word that he spits out as an epithet: "factoids." He says this while sitting in a room dominated by a gigantic flat-panel television broadcasting the Fox News Channel, muted, factoids crawling across the bottom of the screen.

His fear in 1953 that television would kill books has, he says, been partially confirmed by television's effect on substance in the news. The front page of that day's *L.A. Times* reported on the weekend box-office receipts for the third in the *Spider-Man* series of movies, seeming to prove his point.

"Useless," Bradbury says. "They stuff you with so much useless information, you feel full." He bristles when others tell him what his stories mean, and once walked out of a class at UCLA where students insisted his book was about government censorship. He's now bucking the widespread conventional wisdom with a video clip on his Web site (http://www.raybradbury.com/at_home_clips.html), titled "Bradbury on censorship/television."

As early as 1951, Bradbury presaged his fears about TV, in a letter about the dangers of radio, written to fantasy and science-fiction writer Richard Matheson. Bradbury wrote that "Radio has contributed to our 'growing lack of attention.'... This sort of hopscotching existence makes it almost impossible for people, myself included, to sit down and get into a novel again. We have become a short story reading people, or, worse than that, a QUICK reading people."

He says the culprit in *Fahrenheit 451* is not the state — it is the people. Unlike Orwell’s *1984*, in which the government uses television screens to indoctrinate citizens, Bradbury envisioned television as an opiate. In the book, Bradbury refers to televisions as “walls” and its actors as “family,” a truth evident to anyone who has heard a recap of network shows in which a fan refers to the characters by first name, as if they were relatives or friends.

The book’s story centers on Guy Montag, a California fireman who begins to question why he burns books for a living. Montag eventually rejects his authoritarian culture to join a community of individuals who memorize entire books so they will endure until society once again is willing to read.

Bradbury imagined a democratic society whose diverse population turns against books: Whites reject *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and blacks disapprove of *Little Black Sambo*. He imagined not just political correctness, but a society so diverse that all groups were “minorities.” He wrote that at first they condensed the books, stripping out more and more offending passages until ultimately all that remained were footnotes, which hardly anyone read. Only after people stopped reading did the state employ firemen to burn books.

Most Americans did not have televisions when Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451*, and those who did watched 7-inch screens in black and white. Interestingly, his book imagined a future of giant color sets — flat panels that hung on walls like moving paintings. And television was used to broadcast meaningless drivel to divert attention, and thought, away from an impending war.

Bradbury’s latest revelations might not sit well in L.A.’s television industry, where Scott Kaufer, a longtime television writer and producer, argues, “Television is good for books and has gotten more people to read them simply by promoting them,” via shows like *This Week* and *Nightline*.

Kaufer says he hopes Bradbury “will be good enough in hindsight to see that instead of killing off literature, [TV] has given it an entire boost.” He points to the success of fantasy author Stephen King in television and film, noting that when Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451*, another unfounded fear was also taking hold — that television would destroy the film industry.

And in fact, Bradbury became famous because his stories were translated for television, beginning in 1951 for the show *Out There*. Eventually he had his own program, *The Ray Bradbury Theater*, on HBO.

Bradbury spends most of his time now in a small space on the second floor of his home that contains books and mementos. There is his Emmy from *The Halloween Tree*, an Oscar that belonged to a friend who died, a sculpture of a dinosaur and various Halloween decorations. Bradbury, before a stroke left him in a wheelchair, typed in the basement, which is filled with stuffed animals, toys, fireman hats and bottles of dandelion wine. He referred to these props as “metaphors,” totems he drew on to spark his imagination and drive away the demons of the blank page.

Beginning in Arizona when his parents bought him a toy typewriter, Bradbury has written a short story a week since the 1930s. Now he dictates his tales over the phone, each weekday between 9 a.m. and noon, to his daughter Alexandria.

Bradbury has always been a fan, and advocate, of popular culture despite his criticisms of it. Yet he harbors

a distrust of “intellectuals.” Without defining the term, he says another reason why he rarely leaves L.A. to travel to New York is “their intellectuals.”

Dana Gioia, a poet who is chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and who wrote a letter in support of granting Bradbury a Pulitzer honor, compared him to J.D. Salinger, Jack London and Edgar Allan Poe. Another supporter wrote that Bradbury’s works “have become the sort of classics that kids read for fun and adults reread for their wisdom and artistry.”

In June, Gauntlet Press will release *Match to Flame*, a collection of 20 short stories by Bradbury that led up to *Fahrenheit 451*. Pointing to his unpublished proofreading version of the upcoming collection, Bradbury says that rereading his stories made him cry. “It’s hard to believe I wrote such stories when I was younger,” he says.

His book still stands as a classic. But one of L.A.’s best-known residents wants it understood that when he wrote it he was far more concerned with the dulling effects of TV on people than he was on the silencing effect of a heavy-handed government. While television has in fact superseded reading for some, at least we can be grateful that firemen still put out fires instead of start them.

