

Ray Bradbury's Abiding Influence

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Ray Bradbury's career spanned seven decades and intersected a remarkable, wide-ranging gamut of American cultural history. He was closely associated with Hollywood, where his stories and books were adapted for feature films and television. Adaptations of his work for network radio broadcasts began in 1946 and continued, both at home and abroad, until three years before his passing in 2012. For more than forty years he adapted dozens of his stories for successful stage runs in Los Angeles and occasionally for national venues. But his influence reached even broader cultural stages, writing for radio, film, television, and stage theater production. Throughout his life he defended public libraries and First Amendment rights, and eventually became one of the most prominent public advocates for space exploration. While he is most well-known for his fiction, having published more than four hundred stories and twenty-seven book-length works, including *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*, *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, *The October Country*, *Dandelion Wine*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, and *Fahrenheit 451*, he also engaged real-world issues in his writing, including racial and political intolerance, freedom of the imagination, the threat of nuclear war, the need to fund the American Space program, and the vital importance of literacy.

Nearly all of Bradbury's books remain popular today; *Fahrenheit 451*, his classic tale of authoritarian government overreach and cultural devaluing of literacy culminating in censorship and book burning, remains a best seller after nearly seven decades in print. In 2006, *Fahrenheit 451* became a core reading selection of the National Endowment for the Arts' Big Read program. Other Bradbury works have been published in over one thousand literary anthologies featured in the curriculum of schools throughout the United States.

Infusing his work with prose poems and rich metaphors, Bradbury used his literary craft to probe the human condition, often bypassing the technological terrain of more traditional "hard science fiction" narratives. His unconventional approach to the genre, shirking the formulas used by his contemporaries when writing for pulp fiction magazines, propelled Ray Bradbury to new heights as he became a catalyst for bringing the often marginalized science fiction genre into the literary mainstream. Bradbury also reached international acclaim for his ability to reimagine the

<https://doi.org/10.18060/27567>

The New Ray Bradbury Review, Issue 7, August 2023.
Published by the Ray Bradbury Center, Indiana University Indianapolis.

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American gothic tradition and the dark fantastic. Horror writers from Stephen King and Peter Straub to Clive Barker, Neil Gaiman, and Dan Chaon were particularly influenced by Bradbury's ability to refashion gothic tale settings in American small towns and suburbs. Other notable authors such as Margaret Atwood, Steven Barnes, Charles Johnson, Salman Rushdie, Michael Chabon, and the recent two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Colson Whitehead were all inspired by Bradbury's imagination, style, and ability to cleverly depict human encounters with the unknown.

Bradbury's rise to literary prominence during the first two decades of his professional writing career is documented via his appearance in two *O. Henry Prize* anthologies and four *Best American Short Stories* volumes. He also won The Benjamin Franklin Award (1953-54), The World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement (1977), the Grand Master Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America, and the PEN Center USA West Lifetime Achievement Award (1985).¹ Bradbury was also an Academy Award nominated screenwriter and an award-winning television writer, receiving a 1979 Emmy Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for his documentary work on "Infinite Horizons: Space Beyond Apollo." He won numerous Cable-ACE Awards and nominations for *The Ray Bradbury Theater* (1986-92), which transformed his best-known short stories into 30-minute teleplays. He also won the 1993-1994 *Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing in an Animated Program* for the animated adaptation of his novel *The Halloween Tree*. He knew many of the great Hollywood actors and directors of his day and even wrote the screenplay for the 1956 Warner Brothers award-winning production of *Moby Dick* for John Huston. He wrote teleplays of his own works for Alfred Hitchcock and Rod Serling.

In 2000 Bradbury was awarded the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Four years later, he received the National Medal of Arts from President George W. Bush, and his 2007 Pulitzer Prize citation recognized his "distinguished, prolific and deeply influential career as an unmatched author of science fiction and fantasy."²

Bradbury's influence, however, is not limited to the North American continent. He is one of the most widely translated authors in the world, ranging from various editions in French, German, Italian, and Spanish to many non-western languages including Arabic, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and Thai. Bradbury's French readers were particularly drawn to his surreal short fiction, and he was eventually awarded the French *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Commandeur) Medal in 2007. Perhaps the most surprising and most indicative emblems of Bradbury's international influence are the many Russian awards that he received throughout the twentieth Century, particularly his 2007 Olympus Award from the Russian Academy of Science. Ray Bradbury, writing at the height of McCarthyism, when Cold War tensions haunted nearly every aspect of civilian life in the U.S., was read by Russians and Americans alike. His vision for space exploration transcended national boundaries, imagining a widespread, collaborative human endeavor to the point that it was appreciated by archrivals. Perhaps this point is most profoundly illustrated in the details of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's June 1990 visit to the United States. Gorbachev invited his family's two favorite authors, Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury, to a state luncheon

¹ NEA, "Ray Bradbury," April 8, 2013, <https://www.arts.gov/honors/medals/ray-bradbury>.

² The Pulitzer Prizes, "Ray Bradbury," The 2007 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Special Awards and Citations, 2007, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/ray-bradbury>.

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given at the Russian Embassy in Washington, D. C.³

Bradbury's contributions as a Space Age visionary expanded his influence into the next frontier. During the 1960s, Bradbury emerged on an international level as one of the most popular and dynamic advocates for space exploration. His award-winning articles for *Life* magazine excited millions of readers about humanity's potential to reach the stars, and he became a frequent speaker at Caltech and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.⁴ As the space program began to focus on unmanned exploration after the Apollo missions, Bradbury continued his devoted support of the space program through continued interactions with Jet Propulsion Laboratory teams as well as the Caltech faculty who played vital roles in the Mariner 9 orbital photographic surveys of Mars; the Viking Mars landings; the Voyager missions to Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune; the Mars Odyssey thermal imaging program; and the first Mars rovers—Spirit and Opportunity. While dozens of artifacts and mementos commemorating Bradbury's prolonged engagement with these space exploration programs are housed in the Ray Bradbury Center, his broad influence is also reflected in numerous global interplanetary achievements. For example, the Phoenix Mars Lander brought a digitized copy of Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* to the red planet where it remains at the time of this writing. On August 22, 2012, just ten weeks after Bradbury's passing, the rover *Curiosity*'s touchdown point on Mars was re-named "Bradbury Landing."⁵ Additionally, scientists and astronauts who came of age reading Bradbury's works have named a moon crater, an asteroid, and several Martian terrain features in his honor. Bradbury's science fiction stories approached space travel with a sense of childlike wonder, and that sense of wonder was imparted to many of his readers. His dreams of space became their dreams, and this inspiring influence eventually led to friendships with astronauts Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin (Apollo 11), Alan Bean (Apollo 12), David Scott (Apollo 9 and 15), and Harrison Schmidt (Apollo 17), as well as such Space Age luminaries as writer Arthur C. Clarke, astronomer Carl Sagan, and Jet Propulsion Laboratory director Bruce Murray.

It is certainly possible (though difficult) to overstate Bradbury's importance as a twentieth century American writer, but it is impossible to deny his wide-ranging cultural significance. Scholars of twentieth century American film, history, space exploration, television, and literature cannot *broadly* examine what was going on in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century without acknowledging, on some level, Bradbury's pervasive influence.

Bradbury's Place in the American Literary Tradition

Shortly after Bradbury's passing on June 6, 2012, President Barack Obama released the following

³ Bob Remington, "Ray Bradbury," *Edmonton Journal*, June 24, 1990; Jonathan R. Eller, *Bradbury Beyond Apollo* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), pp. 184–185.

⁴ CoconutScienceLab, "Ray Bradbury - An Inspiration, Visits JPL | NASA Mars Rover Program Science Fiction HD," accessed November 19, 2018, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hh7eiGA85ws>.

⁵ Alison Flood, "Ray Bradbury's Influence on Our Culture Was Transformative, Says Barack Obama," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2012, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/07/ray-bradbury-influence-barack-obama>; Dwayne Brown and Steve Cole, "NASA Mars Rover Begins Driving at Bradbury Landing," Press Releases, NASA, August 22, 2012, https://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2012/aug/HQ_12-292_Mars_Bradbury_Landing.html.

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statement:

For many Americans, the news of Ray Bradbury's death immediately brought to mind images from his work, imprinted in our minds, often from a young age. His gift for storytelling reshaped our culture and expanded our world. But Ray also understood that our imaginations could be used as a tool for better understanding, a vehicle for change, and an expression of our most cherished values. There is no doubt that Ray will continue to inspire many more generations with his writing.⁶

At the time, Bradbury's long career as a writer earned him international acclaim, unprecedented for one who cut his creative teeth on the fragile paper of pulp magazines during the first half of the twentieth century. This child of the Depression, unable to afford college, pursued his postsecondary education as a type of autodidact. He schooled himself on how to develop his literacy by visiting the local public library several times per week and selecting professional Los Angeles based writers such as Leigh Brackett and Henry Kuttner as mentors. In addition to being mentored by these hands-on volunteer tutors, Ray Bradbury stood on the shoulders of literary giants through his intense library reading sessions. His strongest influencers include Steinbeck, Hemingway, Shakespeare, Poe, Dickens, Shaw, Welty, Doyle, Whitman, Dickinson, and even the problematic Kipling. He was also influenced from a young age by creative adventure and fantasy story writers like Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Cummings, Clark Ashton Smith, his future mentor Edmond Hamilton, and Nelson Bond. Bradbury internalized the styles of these writers, allowed them to seep into his subconscious, and used his typewriter as a medium to channel his own unique form of storytelling.

Some of today's most creative and influential literary voices have addressed Bradbury's canonical significance. Margaret Atwood, for example, attempts to account for Bradbury's reach/scope/influence/place on one segment of the "literary map" by saying that "in his best work, Bradbury sinks a taproot right down into the deep, dark, Gothic core of America"⁷—one that stems from superstition and tragedy via incidents like the Salem Witch Trials which reinvent themselves and are acted out again throughout America's short history: "traitors, in the 18th century, at the time of the revolution; or communists, in the 20th; [...] or terrorists, in the 21st."⁸ In this respect, Atwood claims that Bradbury's place on the American literary map is at the intersection of Shirley Jackson ("The Lottery"), Nathaniel Hawthorne ("Young Goodman Brown"), and Henry James ("The Jolly Corner").

As complimentary as Atwood's placement of Bradbury on the American gothic literary map may be, it is too narrow. Novels and stories such as *Fahrenheit 451*, "The Pedestrian," and "The Murderer" place him at an entirely different nexus on the literary map—the intersection between Koestler, Huxley, and Orwell. Stories like "Way in the Middle of the Air," "The Other Foot," "I See You Never," and "The Big Black and White Game" place him in that nebulous space on the map occupied alongside other well-meaning writers who attempt to write thoughtfully about economic and racial injustice from a perspective that could only imagine such experiences. "There

⁶ Matt Compton, "President Obama on Ray Bradbury," The White House, June 6, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2012/06/06/president-obama-ray-bradbury>.

⁷ Margaret Atwood, "Margaret Atwood on Ray Bradbury: The Tale-Teller Who Tapped into the Gothic Core of America," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2012, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/08/margaret-atwood-on-ray-bradbury>.

⁸ Atwood.

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Will Come Soft Rains,” “The Last Night of the World,” “The Highway,” and “Embroidery” place him alongside Tim O’Brien (*The Nuclear Age*), Cormac McCarthy (*The Road*), Aldous Huxley (*Ape and Essence*), Kurt Vonnegut (*Cat’s Cradle*), Judith Merrill (*Shadow on the Hearth*), and many others who imagine nuclear fallout from the perspective of average people who lack agency when it comes to real-time decisions about deploying such destructive weapons of war.

Clearly, Bradbury’s place on the broader literary map is difficult to pinpoint and perhaps this is in part why nearly all of Bradbury’s books remain popular today: there seems to be something for everyone in his novels and story collections.

Ray Bradbury, perhaps more than any other writer of genre fiction, played a critical role in demonstrating that works of SF, fantasy, and horror need not always be relegated to the unheralded margins of pulp fiction, excluded from the realm of literature with a capital “L”. Ironically, most of his stories resist strict classification into any of the three aforementioned genres, particularly science fiction. Bradbury never set out to write a SF story, or a horror story; he simply refused to check the necessary metaphorical boxes to qualify one of his stories for specific genre consideration, and this refusal led to his exclusion from some of the more prominent pulp fiction magazines at the onset of his career.⁹ Rather than privilege genre, Bradbury explored the human condition through narratives that manifest in poetic prose while incorporating certain genre elements in his works—often in unexpected and non-traditional ways. This commitment to independence by refusing to be shackled by genre conventions eventually allowed Bradbury’s work to cross over into the literary mainstream, bridging the arbitrary divide between what many considered gimmicky escapism and high literature. This, of course, did not happen overnight, and many of his most prestigious awards were not achieved until the final decade of his life.

In addition to contending for “Literary” relevance, Bradbury’s refusal to abide by genre convention has caused many fans of “true” or “hard” science fiction to attempt to exclude him from the SF category altogether, and this exclusion still persists in some SF circles today. Over the last three years, I have attended a number of conventions and have met hundreds of science fiction fans through this work in the Ray Bradbury Center. In that time, I have discovered that in some respects “fandom” operates like a form of organized religion with people staking their claims along a wide spectrum of dogma. On one end, there are gatekeepers, ardently trying to implement a protocol for determining who belongs in the fold and who does not. Of course, as with nearly any large and diverse religion, the dogmatists seem to enjoy exercises in futility as it is nearly impossible for all sects—let alone all individuals—to arrive at a single accord on all matters.

On the other end are the gateway folks, holding the door open for anyone remotely interested in the genre. Bradbury does quite well with this latter camp. But I have found that even the most dogmatic adherents to hard science fiction are willing to make a little space for Bradbury in their SF canon; the literary relevance that Bradbury brought to their genre simply cannot be denied. The reasons for this influence are multifaceted, and Damon Knight provides a good start in exploring those reasons in his essay “When I was in Knee-Pants: Ray Bradbury”:

Bradbury’s strength lies in the fact that he writes about things that are really important to us—not the things that we pretend to be interested in—but the fundamental prerational

⁹ Jonathan R. Eller, *Becoming Ray Bradbury*, First Edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

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fears and longings and desires: the rage at being born; the will to be loved; the longing to communicate; the hatred of parents and siblings, the fear of things that are not the self.¹⁰

In *Ray Bradbury Unbound*, Jonathan R. Eller explains how critics like Damon Knight and Anthony Boucher asserted that Bradbury never wrote true science fiction. Knight, however, was also quick to describe the merits of Bradbury's literary prowess in the midst of denying inclusion into the SF canon, praising some of Bradbury's works for providing "pointed social commentary," and others for developing into "effective religious tracts, disguised as science fiction." But the true value for Knight was the underlying spirit of Bradbury's work: "Bradbury, the poet of 20th-century neurosis. Bradbury the isolated spark of consciousness; Bradbury the grown-up child who still remembers, still believes."¹¹ In a similar vein, author Ken Crossen described Bradbury as "the voice of the poet raised against the mechanization of mankind . . . to him there is only a difference of degree between the atom bomb and men tossing beer cans into Martian canals. One destroys the whole man; the other indicates that man is already destroyed."¹²

Indeed, Bradbury was an imaginative trailblazer for the collective dream of humanity expanding its footprint through the cosmos, and his work resonated with readers across the globe regardless of the penchants or prejudices they held for genre fiction. The historical impact of Bradbury's career is not merely that he broke into the literary mainstream by (perhaps paradoxically) shirking convention while rooting his stories in conventional science fiction and fantasy settings, but that he also, without direct intention, pulled the entire science fiction genre with him into that mainstream through the force of gravitational extraction. He was not alone in doing this, but the irony of Bradbury's influence on the science fiction genre is rarely lost on devoted fans and critics of SF. Eller alludes to this by quoting Anthony Boucher in a later chapter of *Unbound*, "The one writer whom the mainstream critics have consistently recognized as an ambassador and almost as a symbol of S.F. is Ray Bradbury . . . yet it can be (and often has been) argued that Bradbury never really wrote science fiction at all."¹³

Bradbury's use of science fiction themes and tropes—planet colonization, space travel, extraterrestrial races, and cyborgs—are all ancillary devices for exploring the human condition. He did not care about how the circuit boards in an electric grandmother functioned or how a rocket ship was able to shuttle across the galaxy. He was concerned with human interaction, development, and potential. What will happen when human beings begin to depend more on their technology than each other? ("The Murderer") How can humans expect to overcome their tribalistic impulses when they colonize other planets? Will Manifest Destiny repeat itself? Will we overcome our fear of "the other" and become a more inclusive species? (*The Martian Chronicles*) What are the consequences of hiring out our imaginations—our ability to craft, connect, and motivate? Will human beings of the future strive to cultivate their humanity through literacy or will convenience lull them into passive complacency ultimately resulting in lives of intellectual inactivity? (*Fahrenheit 451*). Even though the poor understanding of science in his stories may be lampooned in contemporary contexts, those who are familiar with his tales are drawn back to them

¹⁰ Damon Knight, "When I Was in Knee-Pants: Ray Bradbury," in *In Search of Wonder*, First Edition (Chicago: Advent Publishers, 1956). Originally from Knight's review of *The Illustrated Man* in his "Readin' and Writhin'" column, *Science Fiction Quarterly* 1.2 (Feb. 1953), 82.

¹¹ Knight.

¹² Kendell Foster Crossen, "Review: The Golden Apples of the Sun," *Future Science Fiction*, November 1953.

¹³ Anthony Boucher (as H. H. Holmes), "The Eerie Ebb of Science Fiction," *The New York Herald Tribune*, 1962.

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repeatedly—not for their scientific acumen or technological prescience (though a case can certainly be made for the latter in some of his works), but for the subtle humanistic insights they reveal through charming narrative—magnanimity, understanding different perspectives and customs, the creative potential of collaboration vs the disastrous consequences of unbridled tribalism, and the power of literacy which allows us to think the thoughts of some of the most interesting people in history, engage complexity, learn and unlearn, and create new knowledge.

By the end of the 1950s, Bradbury's unique brand of science fiction and his off-trail fantasies combined with the emotional and broadly humanistic qualities of his poetic, metaphor-rich style to attract a broad genre and mainstream literary readership. But why should his reputation endure and even grow stronger well into the twenty-first century? One factor centers on the role of teachers, librarians, and parents in transmitting their early enthusiasm for Bradbury's works to successive generations of readers. Considering that the vast majority of fiction in any form has a short shelf-life, the most expedient way to ensure that certain works are read long after the usual expiration date, is to guarantee that these works are assigned in school. Since the 1955 reprinting of his masterful science fiction tale "There Will Come Soft Rains" in Appleton's *The Informal Reader*, many of Bradbury's stories have appeared in nearly a thousand school textbooks in the United States (and in many more foreign language textbooks abroad). *Fahrenheit 451* is widely taught in schools and at the university level, and has been a favorite of The Big Read program established for communities in 2006 by the National Endowment for the Arts. In this way, Bradbury's place in American culture is constantly renewed—academics assign these works to their undergraduate and graduate students, these students go on to teach, write curriculum, establish public education policy and requirements, and so on.

Because the humanistic qualities of Bradbury's stories have helped many of his works age gracefully and because of his profound impact as a space-age visionary, Bradbury's work holds significant historical and theoretical scholarly merit. His historical influence is amplified by the many writers of the last half-century who found his work formative and inspiring when they were young, as well as the many mid-century literary critics and modernists—including Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, Kingsley Amis, Gilbert Highet, Graham Greene, Dylan Thomas, C. S. Lewis, and W. H. Auden—who recognized the enduring qualities of his work.

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