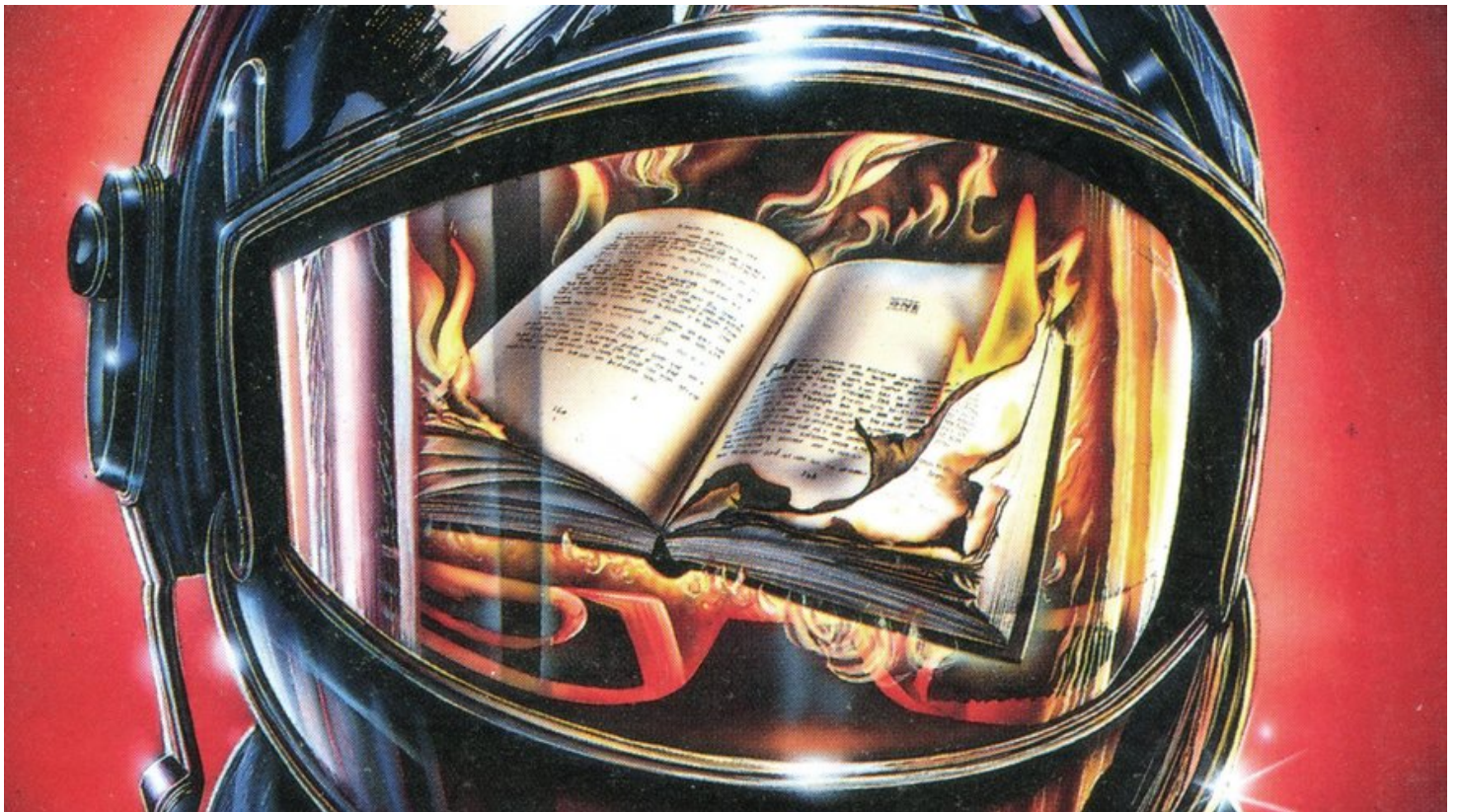


# Essay: Why "Fahrenheit 451" will always be terrifying

By Jeffrey Somers, ThoughtCo.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.15.17

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"Fahrenheit 451" is about a future in which books, and their ideas, are not allowed. Photo from RA.AZ/Flickr

Dystopian science fiction is all about creating nightmarish visions of future societies. There is a reason the genre is so popular: many people look at the future with suspicion and fear. They feel that while the past was pretty good, things are getting worse and the future will be hellish.

Every few years, political events lead to a burst of new interest in certain older dystopian novels. For example, the 2016 U.S. presidential elections pushed George Orwell's book "1984" back onto the bestseller lists. The book was originally published in 1949.

Now, HBO has announced a film adaptation of Ray Bradbury's great 1953 science fiction novel "Fahrenheit 451." The book is one of those rare sci-fi novels that has aged wonderfully. While it was published more than 60 years ago, it remains just as terrifying today as it was when it was written.

## More Than Books

The basic premise of "Fahrenheit 451" is as follows: In the future, houses are largely fireproof and firefighters have been re-purposed as enforcers of laws that prohibit the ownership and reading of books. They burn the possessions and books of anyone caught with books. The main character, Montag, is a fireman who begins to question the society in which he lives, and who begins stealing books from those homes.

This plot is often seen as an attack on censorship. After all, people are still fighting to have books banned from schools, and even "Fahrenheit 451" itself was partially censored by its publisher for decades: An edited "school version" of the book removed the bad language and changed some particularly disturbing ideas. When Bradbury discovered what had happened, he made such a fuss that the publisher re-issued the original, unedited version.

However, the key to understanding what makes the novel so terrifying is that it is not just about books. What Bradbury was really writing about was the effect he thought mass media would have on us over time. In his day, mass media meant television and film. Today, it also includes the Internet.

Bradbury feared mass media would train us to seek constant thrills and make us unable to pay close attention to anything for more than a few minutes. The result would be a population with no interest in finding out how society really works. Indeed, they would not even know what to look for. Society's rulers would be able to operate in secret and our freedoms would be lost.



### **Fake News**

In this new age of "fake news," Fahrenheit 451 is more chilling than ever. We are seeing Bradbury's terrifying vision of the future slowly coming true.

In the novel, the path to book burning is explained this way: First, television and sports shortened attention spans. Then, books began to be shortened to please readers with shorter attention spans. At the same time, small groups of people began to complain about certain ideas in books. Soon, the firefighters were assigned to destroy books to protect people from ideas they would be troubled by.

Things are certainly nowhere near that bad right now — and yet, the seeds are there. Attention spans are shorter, and shortened versions of novels do exist. Films and television have become incredibly fast-paced. Many of us now need stories to be constantly exciting. Slower, more thoughtful stories seem boring.

### **The Whole Point**

That's the reason "Fahrenheit 451" is as terrifying as it ever was. It describes a society that voluntarily and even eagerly brings about its own destruction. When Montag tries to confront his

wife and friends with thoughtful discussion, when he tries to turn off the TV programs and make them think, they become angry and confused. Montag soon realizes that they are beyond help. They do not want to think and understand.

Instead, they prefer to live in a bubble. Book burning began when people chose not to be challenged by thoughts they did not find comforting, thoughts that challenged their preconceptions.

We can see those bubbles everywhere around us today. We all know people who only get their information from limited sources that mostly confirm what they already think. On social media like Facebook or Twitter, you can witness people's hostile reactions to stories they don't like. You can see how people narrow their sources of information to protect themselves from anything scary or challenging.

This means that the seeds of "Fahrenheit 451" are already here. That does not mean it will come to pass, of course — but that is why it's a frightening book. Bradbury's novel is a dark mirror of our modern age, in which unchallenging entertainment is available to us at all times, on devices we carry with us at all times, ready and waiting to drown out any input we do not want to hear.

HBO's adaptation of "Fahrenheit 451" is expected to air in 2018, so it is the perfect time to read or reread the novel. In fact, it is always a perfect time to read this book, which is itself a frightening idea.

## Quiz

- 1 Which statement would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) Dystopian science fiction is great because it creates nightmarish visions of the future.
  - (B) HBO is about to make a movie version of Ray Bradbury's science fiction novel "Fahrenheit 451."
  - (C) "Fahrenheit 451" was once partially censored by its publisher for many years.
  - (D) Many people fear that Bradbury's vision of the future is slowly coming true.

- 2 Read the paragraph below from the section "The Whole Point."

*We can see those bubbles everywhere around us today. We all know people who only get their information from limited sources that mostly confirm what they already think. On social media like Facebook or Twitter, you can witness people's hostile reactions to stories they don't like. You can see how people narrow their sources of information to protect themselves from anything scary or challenging.*

How does the paragraph help develop the CENTRAL idea of the article?

- (A) It illustrates how users of social media prefer to only read stories that they like.
  - (B) It shows that people who get information from limited sources tend to be hostile.
  - (C) It conveys the idea that many people today are uncomfortable thinking for themselves.
  - (D) It explains why many people are interested in various sources of information.
- 3 What is the MAIN reason the author included the section "Fake News?"
- (A) to explain the problem of "fake news" in our society today and how it is being solved
  - (B) to compare Bradbury's vision of the future with what is happening today
  - (C) to explain how different types of media cause shortened attention spans
  - (D) to compare the plot of Bradbury's novel "Fahrenheit 451" with the plots of other novels

- 4 Read the section "The Whole Point."

What is the MAIN reason the author includes information about Montag trying to have a thoughtful discussion with his wife and friends?

- (A) to show what happens when people stop thinking
- (B) to contrast discussions today with discussions in the novel
- (C) to establish the intelligence of the main character of the novel
- (D) to explain a solution to the problem of watching too much TV