Reading Guide for Fahrenheit 451

Fahrenheit 451, first published in 1953, serves as a wonderful supplemental reading when considering social and political themes such as censorship, conformity, education, human interaction and values, culture, history, and more. Thought reading this text, students can better understand and make connections to historical periods such as the Nazi Germany, the Red Scare, McCarthyism, and more.

Part One: The Hearth and the Salamander

1. Clarisse tells Montag that she is seventeen and crazy. She explains, “My uncle says the two always go together. When people ask your age, he said, always say seventeen and insane.” (7) What does her Uncle’s joke illustrate regarding the relationships between youth and adults?

2. Clarisse notes that many people are afraid of firemen. Why do you think this might be the case? How does this differ from the way our society views firemen? Why do you think Clarisse isn’t afraid? (7)

3. When do you think these events are taking place? What evidence makes you think this? (Hint: “Is it true that long ago firemen put fires out instead of going to start them?”) (8)

4. Clarisse says to Montag, “You laugh when I haven’t been funny and you answer right off. You never stop to think what I’ve asked you.” (8) What commentary is she subtly making about him?

5. What is the significance of the numbers 451 and why do you think they are stitched on the fireman’s sleeves?

6. What evidence does Clarisse note that society is in a constant rush? (9) What message do you think the author is trying to convey?

7. Why do you think Montag is so curious about Clarisse’s family and their conversations?

8. Why is Montag struck by Clarisse’s question of whether or not he is “happy?”

9. Bradbury writes of Montag, “He wore his happiness like a mask and the girl had run off across the lawn with the mask and there was no way of going to knock on her door and ask for it back.” (p. 12) What does this mean? What other types of symbolic masks do people wear?

10. Why do you think suicide is prevalent in this society?

11. Why do you think Montag didn’t tell his wife about her suicide attempt? (19) Do you agree or disagree with this decision and why?

12. Clarisse says: “How did it start? How did you get into it? How did you pick your work and how did you happen to think to take the job you have? You’re not like the others. I’ve seen a few; I know. When I talk, you look at time. When I said something about the moon, you looked at the moon, last night. The others would never do that. The others would walk off and leave me talking. Or threaten me. No one has time any more for anyone else. You’re one of the few who put up with me. That’s why I think it’s so strange you’re a fireman. It just doesn’t seem right for you, somehow.” (23-24) What do we learn about Montag in Clarisse’s description of him? What do we learn about this society in general from her comment?

13. “He felt his body divide itself into a hotness and a coldness, a softness and a hardness, a trembling and a not trembling, the two halves grinding one upon the other.” (23-24) What does this line tell us? What might it be foreshadowing?

14. Montag has alluded to the “ventilator grille in the hall at home and what lay hidden behind” several times. What do you predict is in the grille? (10, 27)

15. Beatty asks Montag if he has a guilty conscious. Does he? What makes you think this? (28)

16. Reread the passage where Clarisse discusses being social and addresses the day to day life of youth:
“‘I’m antisocial, they say. I don’t mix. It’s so strange. I’m very social indeed. It all depends on what you mean by social, doesn’t it? Social to me means talking to you about things like this.’ She rattled some chestnuts that had fallen off the tree in the front yard. ‘Or talking about how strange the world is. Being with people is nice. But I don’t think it’s social to get a bunch of people together and then not let them talk, do you?’ An hour of TV class, an hour of basketball or baseball or running, another hour of transcription history or painting pictures, and more sports, but do you know, we never ask questions, or at least most don’t; they just run the answers at you, bing, bing, bing, and us sitting there for four more hours of film teacher. That’s not social to me at all. It’s a lot of funnels and a lot of water poured down the spout and out the bottom, and them telling us it’s wine when it’s not. They run us so ragged by the end of the day we can’t do anything but go to bed or head for a Fun Park to bully people around, break windowpanes in the Window Smasher place or wreck cars in the Car Wrecker place with the big steel ball. Or go out in the cars and race on the streets, trying to see how close you can get to lampposts, playing “chicken” and “knock hubcaps.” I guess I’m everything they say I am, all right. I haven’t any friends. That’s supposed to prove I’m abnormal. But everyone I know is either shouting or dancing around like wild or beating up one another. Do you notice how people hurt each other nowadays?” (29-30)

What message is Clarisse trying to convey? Why do you think she complains that students “never ask questions?” Do you see any similarities in the life of youth today as described by Clarisse? Explain.

17. Why does Clarisse say she is afraid of children her age? (“I’m afraid of children my age. They kill each other. Did it always use to be that way?” My uncle says no. Six of my friends have been shot in the last year alone. Ten of them die in car wrecks. I’m afraid of them and they don’t like me because I’m afraid. My uncle says his grandfather remembered when children didn’t kill each other. But that was a long time ago when they had things different. They believed in responsibility, my uncle says.” (30)

18. Clarisse says that “People don’t talk about anything…nobody says anything different from anyone else…My uncle says it was different once” (p.31). Why does this bother her?

19. What do you think Montag means when he says his coworkers faces were sun burnt by “a thousand real and ten thousand imaginary fires?” (33)

20. It is stated that all fireman look the same — what is the significance of this? (33)

21. What kind of history is provided to Montag when he asks whether fireman used to put fires out? (34) What might this say regarding how history is recorded and retold?

22. Why is Montag so bothered by the burning of Mrs. Blake’s home? (36-40)

23. Why do you think Montag and his wife can’t remember when they met? (43)

24. Montag notes that he feels “empty” - “And he remembered thinking then that if she died, he was certain he wouldn’t cry. For it would be the dying of an unknown, a street face, a newspaper image, and it was suddenly so very wrong that he had begun to cry, not at death but at the thought of not crying at death, a silly empty man near a silly empty woman, while the hungry snake made her still more empty. How do you get so empty? he wondered. Who takes it out of you?” (44) Why do you think he feels this emptiness? How would you respond to his question regarding who took it out of him?

25. Summarize the history of the fire department according to Beatty. (54) According to Beatty, what caused the rule regarding books? (58)

26. Reread Beatty’s commentary regarding how schools used to be:

“With school turning out more runners, jumpers, racers, tinkerers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and imaginative creators, the word 'intellectual' of course, became the swear word it deserved to be. You always dread the unfamiliar. Surely you remember the boy in your own school class who was exceptionally 'bright,' did most of the reciting and answering while the others sat like so many leaden idols, hating him. And wasn’t it this bright boy you selected for beatings and tortures after hours? Of course it was. We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge
themselves against. So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man’s mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man?” (58)

27. Based on this passage alone, how would you characterize Beatty? According to Beatty, what type of student should be valued and why? Why do you think Beatty feels that “we must all be alike?” Do you see examples of this same mentality in our society today? Are there specific examples of anti-intellectual sentiment in your school or community?

28. According to Beatty, what are firemen tasked with? Should a society have “custodians of our peace of mind,” “official censors, judges, and executors” who protect us from “understandable and rightful dread of being inferior?” (59) Explain.

29. What does Beatty say regarding keeping people happy?
   “‘You must understand that our civilization is so vast that we can’t have our minorities upset and stirred. Ask yourself, What do we want in this country, above all? People want to be happy, isn’t that right? Haven’t you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. We’ll, aren’t they? Don’t we keep them moving, don’t we give them fun? That’s all we live for, isn’t it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these.’” (59)
   How does this society attempt to preserve happiness? Are these means effective? Why or why not? Do you agree with Beatty that we should only live for pleasure? Why or why not?

30. How does Beatty justify the burning of books?
   “Colored people don’t like Little Black Sambo. Burn it. White people don’t feel good about Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Burn it. Someone’s written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Burn the book. Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag. Take your flight outside. Better yet, into the incinerator. Funerals are unhappy and pagan? Eliminate them, too. Five minutes after a person is dead he’s on his way to the Big Flue, the Incinerators serviced by helicopters all over the country. Ten minutes after death a man’s a speck of black dust. Let’s not quibble over individuals with memoriums. Forget them. Burn all, burn everything. Fire is bright and fire is clean.” (60)
   What ensures that our government cannot instate similar practices as those addressed in this passage, such as laws against funerals or mandatory book burnings? By having a First Amendment that protects freedom of speech and assembly, we may often come across ideas that we vehemently disagree with. For example, as long as they get a valid permit and protest peacefully, a hate group such as the KKK can share its ideas and opinions legally. What is your opinion of this?

31. How does the destruction of books lead to more happiness and equality, according to Beatty? Does his lecture to Montag on the rights of man sound like any rhetoric still employed today?

32. Why do you think Montag is so upset over Clarisse’s absence?

33. Why does Beatty say Clarisse is better off dead? (60)

34. In what ways was Clarisse different from the majority of people Montag meets?

35. According to Beatty, how can people be given happiness and peace? (61)
   “If you don’t want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war. If the government is inefficient, top heavy, and tax-mad, better it be all those than that people worry over it. Peace, Montag. Give the people contests they win by remembering the words to more popular songs or the names of state capitals or how much corn Iowa grew last year. Cram them full of noncombustible data, chock them so damned full of ‘facts’ they feel stuffed, but absolutely ‘brilliant’ with information. Then they’ll feel they’re thinking, they’ll get a sense of motion without moving. And they’ll be happy, because facts of that sort don’t change…” (61)
   What is Beatty advocating for? What is your opinion of his solution for happiness and peace?

36. What do you think the purpose of Beatty’s visit with Montag was? If you were Montag, how would you be feeling after this visit?

37. What does the absence of front porches in the design of homes symbolize? (63)
38. Clarisse had described a past that Montag has never known: one with front porches, gardens, and rocking chairs. What do these items have in common, and how might their removal have encouraged Montag’s repressive society?

39. Why is Mildred so upset by the books? (67)

40. Montag’s television includes headphones called “seashells.” The “wall to wall circuit” allows Mildred to enter the “play” and, therefore, the television programming. How does the technology within the novel compare to our current technology? Based on your reading of this first section, does technology improve the quality of life for Montag and Mildred? Why or why not?

Part II: The Sieve and the Sand

1. What is Montag searching for in the books? (73-74)
2. Why do you think Montag remembers trying to fill a sieve with sand at this point? What does this memory symbolize? (78)
3. Faber says that “Christ is one of the ‘family’ now. I often wonder if God recognizes His own son the way we’ve dressed him up, or is it dressed him down? He’s a saccharine when he isn’t making veiled references to certain commercial products that every worshiper absolutely needs.” (81) What point is Faber making? What comparisons can you make to today’s society?
4. Why does Faber call himself a coward? (82) Do you agree that he should be characterized as such? Why or why not? (connect to “First they came for the Jews…”)
5. Montag says that “We have everything we need to be happy, but we aren’t happy. Something’s missing.” What do you think is missing? (82) What three things are missing according to Faber?
6. How does Faber define “quality” in a book? How would you define quality?
7. According to Faber, why are books hated and feared? (83)
8. Faber says, “The whole culture’s shot through. The skeleton needs melting and reshaping. Good God, it isn’t as simple as just picking up a book you laid down half a century ago. Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord. You firemen provide a circus now and then at which buildings are set off and crowds gather for the pretty blaze, but it’s a small sideshow indeed, and hardly necessary to keep things in line. So few want to be rebels anymore. And out of those few, most, like myself, scare easily. Can you dance faster than the White Clown, shout louder than ‘Mr. Gimmick’ and the parlor ‘families?’ If you can, you’ll win your way Montag. In any event, you’re a fool. People are having fun.” (87)

What message is he sending about the people of this society? Why do you think so few people are interested in being rebels? Do you see any comparisons between today’s society and the society Faber is critiquing? Explain.

9. Faber tells Montag, "Don't look to be saved in any one thing, person, machine, or library. Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore." How good is this advice in your opinion?
10. Montag says, “I don’t want to change sides and just be told what to do. There’s no reason to change if I do that.” (92) What message is he sending?
11. According to Beatty, what is necessary to keep people happy? Do you agree or disagree and why?
12. What is the response of Mildred’s friends when Montag reads “Dover Beach?” Why does Montag kick them out of his house? (100) Do you predict there will be consequences for this action? If so, what consequences?

Part III: Burning Bright

1. Beatty compares Montag to Icarus when he says, “Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he’s burnt his damn wings, he wonders why. Didn’t I hint enough when I sent the Hound around your place?” (p.113) Why do you think this comparison is made? How does this shed light on Montag’s character and development?
2. What might the Mechanical Hound symbolize? What other symbolism is present throughout the book?
3. What does Granger's reference to the Phoenix symbolize? (p. 163)
4. Granger says, "We're going to meet a lot of lonely people in the next week and the next month and the next year. And when they ask us what we're doing, you can say We're remembering. That's where we'll win out in the long run. And someday we'll remember so much that we'll build the biggest grave of all time and shove war in and cover it up." (164) What does his response of "We're remembering" mean? What commentary is he making about war?
5. Montag's escape out of the city to the peace of the country leads him to discover that "He was not empty. There was more than enough here to fill him." How does his new environment compare to his former life in the city? What influence do books appear to be having on him?
6. Looking back on what you've read regarding Montag's life and Clarisse's life, how have they differed?
7. Reread the detailed description of the Hound (p.24) and the battle (p.120). Why is this moment significant? In what way does Montag's expression of affection for the Hound mark a turning point in his development? What role does affection play in this world? What might be the significance of Montag's final battle with the Hound?

General Discussion

1. Bradbury begins the novel with a quote from Juan Ramon Jimenez: "If they give you ruled paper, write the other way." Why do you think Bradbury chose this particular quote? How does it relate to the book and what message is he trying to convey?
2. Are there any circumstances where censorship might play a beneficial role in society? Explain.
3. Do you approve of banning books and why? If so, under what circumstances? Who do you think should decide such issues of censorship?
4. How do you think "political correctness" relates to this book and today's society?
5. What can Fahrenheit 451 teach us about today's world?
6. Are there some books that should be banned?
7. If you had to memorize a single book or risk its extinction, which book would you choose?
8. What are the characteristics of a great book? (Note these on chart paper.) Which of these characteristics did you find in Fahrenheit 451? What other books include some of the same characteristics?
9. A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Bradbury provide through Montag? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of his generation?
10. If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? What would be the best way to convey your message? Why might a writing a novel be an effective way to communicate your message?
11. Montag comes to learn that "firemen are rarely necessary" because "the public itself stopped reading of its own accord." Bradbury wrote his novel in 1953. Do you feel that his prophecy come true today? Why or why not?
12. Think about a time when you had an opinion on a controversial issue that was different from those around you. How did you feel? Did you express your opposing view, keep it to yourself, or go against your beliefs and agree with the others? Explain.
13. Do you think people in our society today tend to support conformity? Why or why not? What evidence makes you think this?
14. What groups of people can you think of that are singled out or targeted because their views, choice of lifestyle, etc. is perhaps less mainstream?
16. Reconsider Faber's three necessities for happiness. Are these necessities present in our society? Explain.

Activities
1. Focus on the three section titles. Why do you think Bradbury named each section the way he did? Imagine that you have been selected to do an illustration to accompany each of the section title pages. Choose one of the titles and create the illustration you think would best represent it. Your illustration can be literal, abstract, or symbolic.

2. Consider the various conflicts in our world today. Choose one conflict that you are interested in or moved by. Write a paragraph summarizing what you know about the conflict and how you feel about it. Develop a symbol to capture the complexity of the conflict.

3. Imagine you have been hired to remake the movie of Fahrenheit 451. First, choose what you believe to be the three most important moments that take place in the book. In groups, create three movie scenes that stage each scene.

4. Imagine you have been hired to write a sequel to Fahrenheit 451. Think about what would happen after the point when the book ends. What would the beginning, middle, and end of the sequel look like? Write the opening paragraphs to the sequel, making sure you immediately capture the reader’s attention.

5. Divide the class into two sides. Tell half the class to assume the character of a government official who strongly believes that censorship and book burning can protect society. The other half of the class should assume the character of a citizen who is passionate about freedom of speech. Have each side take turns presenting arguments in their characters.

6. Rewrite a moment from the novel from a character’s perspective other than Montag (i.e. Clarisse, Faber, Beatty, etc.)

7. Write a letter to Captain Beatty responding to his ideas about education and his statement that “a book is a loaded gun” (p.58). Do you agree or disagree with his ideas? In your letter, explain your own ideas about education and the value of books.


Literature and Censorship

"The paper burns, but the words fly away." These words about book burning from the martyred rabbi Akiba Ben Joseph appear on one wall of Ray Bradbury’s beloved Los Angeles Public Library—itself the survivor of a horrific 1986 fire. They also underscore a truth too often ignored: Censorship almost never works. Banning or burning a book may take it out of circulation temporarily, but it usually makes people even more curious to read the work in question. Under Joseph Stalin and his successors, Russians banned questionable books and killed or imprisoned their authors, yet underground or samizdat editions passed from hand to hand and ultimately helped topple the Soviet system. Adolf Hitler exhorted his followers to burn books by Jewish or “subversive” authors, but the best of those books have outlasted Nazi Germany by a good sixty years. In an added irony, accounts of Nazi book burnings helped inspire Fahrenheit 451, one of the most haunting denunciations of censorship in all literature.

How ironic, too, that Bradbury’s own indictment of censorship has itself been repeatedly censored. Fourteen years after Fahrenheit 451’s initial release, some educators succeeded in persuading its publisher to release a special edition. This edition modified more than seventy-five passages to eliminate mild curse words, and to "clean up" two incidents in the book. (A minor character, for example, was changed from "drunk" to "sick.") When Bradbury learned of the changes, he demanded that the publishers withdraw the censored version, and they complied. Since 1980, only Bradbury’s original text has been available. As a result, some schools have
banned the book from course lists. For all these attempts to sanitize or banish it completely, Bradbury has remained diligent in his defense of his masterpiece, writing in a coda that appears in some editions of the book:

"Do not insult me with the beheadings, finger-choppings or the lung-deflations you plan for my works. I need my head to shake or nod, my hand to wave or make into a fist, my lungs to shout or whisper with. I will not go gently onto a shelf, degutted, to become a non-book."

Other frequently censored books:

• The Grapes of Wrath
  Consistently ranked among the most often banned books in the American literary canon, John Steinbeck's 1937 novel has faced countless challenges from library systems and school districts. Among the most common complaints are its depictions of rural people as, to quote one petition, "low, ignorant, profane, and blasphemous."

• To Kill a Mockingbird
  The Committee on Intellectual Freedom at the American Library Association has listed Harper Lee's 1960 book as one of the ten most commonly challenged. Many school districts have banned it for its racial slurs and the occasional mild swear word.

• A Farewell to Arms
  Ernest Hemingway's third novel (1929) was a popular and critical success, though authorities in America and abroad disagreed. The book initially appeared as a five-part series in Scribner's Magazine, which Boston city officials banned as obscene. In Italy, it was deemed unpatriotic for its unflattering, and accurate, account of the Italian Army's retreat from Caporetto.

• The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
  The Concord Public Library in Massachusetts proscribed Mark Twain's enduring masterpiece as "trash suitable only for the slums" when it first came out in 1885. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People demanded its removal from New York City high schools in 1957 for a new reason: alleged racist content.

German soldiers and civilians give the Nazi salute, thousands of books smolder during a bookburning, May 1933.

Source: [http://www.neabigread.org/books/fahrenheit451/fahrenheit451_03.php](http://www.neabigread.org/books/fahrenheit451/fahrenheit451_03.php)
"Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation." (Library Bill of Rights, adopted 1948)

"Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord. You firemen provide a circus now and then... hardly necessary to keep things in line." (Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451)

The phrase "book-burning" brings one thing to mind-- a scene from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, in which a mountain of smoldering literature burns during a Nazi rally. I find it difficult to think of book-burning outside of the Nazi frame. In fact, I find it difficult to think of it other than in a country with a totalitarian, militaristic, or dictatorial government. It would have to be a government that enforces the book-burning on a powerless and reluctant society. It never crossed my mind that books could be burning because the people wanted them burned. This is the problem that Raymond Bradbury addresses in his novel Fahrenheit 451. He not only introduces the idea of the public being responsible for the book-burning, but he places the novel in the context of the United States, the world's largest democracy then, 1953, and now.

Considering the Red Scare and McCarthyism of the 1950's, the idea of book-censorship in the U.S. can come as no shock. As early as 1920, the government authorized raids on private houses and labor headquarters in response to fears of communist domination (de Koster 157). On May 26, 1938, the U.S. House of Representatives set up a committee to investigate "un-American" activities, eventually concentrating on individuals with communist sympathies. On October 20, 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) opened public hearings on alleged communist infiltration of Hollywood (de Koster 158). These "Hollywood Hearings" had three goals in mind: to prove that the Screen Writer's Guild had communist members; that these writers had inserted subversive propaganda into Hollywood films; and, according to committee head J. Parnell Thomas, that President Roosevelt had encouraged pro-Soviet films during WWII. None of these claims held any water in court, but they forced many people to leave Hollywood, forever branded. In 1950, President Truman instructed the Atomic Energy Commission to produce the hydrogen bomb, which would ultimately have a far greater potential for destruction than the A-bombs dropped on Japan in WWII (de Koster 158). On December 2, 1954, the U.S. Senate finally censured Senator Joseph McCarthy for his insulting attacks to fellow senators and "accusations of treason against army officials, for indiscriminately accusing people of being communists without proof and designating guilt by association, and for contempt of a Senate committee investigating his conduct and financial affairs" (de Koster 159). McCarthy's power to continue his investigation of supposed communist subversion was taken away.

Even though McCarthy was unable to continue his communist-hunts, 1950's America still faced many problems. According to critic Jack Zipes, more than just the Red Scare contributed to the rise of media censorship in the U.S.-

The McCarthy witch hunts, the Cold War, the Korean War, the rapid rise of television as a determinant in the culture industry, the spread of advertisement, the abuse of technology within the military-industrial complex, the frustration and violence of the younger generation, the degradation of the masses- these are the factors which went into the making of Fahrenheit 451 (de Koster 125).
Zipes is saying that all of these things- the threat of communism, war, the rising power of TV, and general dissent and frustration among the people contributed to the picture of America that Bradbury paints in *Fahrenheit 451*. With all these contributing factors in mind, it comes as no surprise that media forms such as books and journals became closely monitored in the 1940's and 1950's. The American Library Association, however, directly opposed the censorship of books and adopted a Library Bill of Rights in 1948. It affirmed that "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (Article II), and that "Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (Article III).

The ALA based their Library Bill of Rights on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states that "Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." The ALA interprets this in a way that defines book censorship as the denial of another's right to read. By limiting the availability of certain books, one's right to read of "unorthodox" or "unpopular" viewpoints would be violated. The ALA does not claim to hold any one viewpoint above another, but stands firm on the grounds that all viewpoints should be available to those who wish to read about them.

With all of this in mind, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* does not seem all that far-fetched. Zipes states in his essay that "The censorship of books which dealt with socialism, eroticism, and sexuality in the early 1950's made the extension of Montag's actions conceivable for Bradbury and his readers" (de Koster 127). Bradbury was not writing about some American society of the future, says Zipes, but he was writing of the America in which he himself lived. The audience that Bradbury was writing for would be familiar with the concepts of book censorship and banning, the constant threat of war, and the growing attachment to technology. Even though the book takes place some time in the future (perhaps a few decades later?), the readers would be able to identify with the characters and understand the points that Bradbury was making.

*Fahrenheit 451* opens with Guy Montag, a fireman, burning down one of many condemned homes: "With the brass nozzle in his fists, with this great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history. With his symbolic helmet numbered 451 on his stolid head, and his eyes all orange flame with the thought of what came next, he flicked the igniter and the house jumped up in a gorging fire that burned the evening sky red and yellow and black... He wanted above all, like the old joke, to shove a marshmallow on a stick in the furnace, while the flapping pigeon-winged books died on the porch and lawn of the house. While the books went up in sparkling whirls and blew away on a wind turned dark with burning."

The next sentence is even more grim: "Montag grinned the fierce grin of all men singed and driven back by flame." Montag is a fireman, but unlike the fire-fighters of our present-day society, Montag and his fellow firemen start fires, and they enjoy it. When an alarm is sounded, the firemen load up on their truck and quickly arrive at the scene: a residence where banned books are located. The process is simple; the houses are fire-proofed, so only the books (and whatever other furnishings are left) are consumed by the flames that burst forth from the kerosene and the igniter. The books are burned-- gone-- a distant thing of the past, and the firemen's work is done. They are able to return to their homes after the day's work is done, whistling all the way and not giving the slightest thought as to the validity of their actions.

As well-oiled as this machine seems to work, life without books is a thoughtless and empty existence, according to Bradbury. Montag meets 17 year old Clarisse McClellan on his walk home from work one evening, and she asks him, "Do you ever read any of the books you burn?" They continue to discuss how reading the banned books is against the law, how long houses have been fire-proofed, and what the role of the fireman used to be.
Montag's relationship with Clarisse, short-lived as it may be, turns out to be the reason for his self-inquiry. He begins to question why he became a fireman and if he is happy with his life. Searching for answers, he turns to the seemingly well-read Captain Beatty. Beatty responds with a brief history of the Firemen of America, which reads as follows:

Established, 1790, to burn English-influenced books in the Colonies.
First Fireman: Benjamin Franklin.
RULE 1. Answer the alarm swiftly.
2. Start the fire swiftly.
3. Burn everything.
4. Report back to firehouse immediately.
5. Stand alert for other alarms.

Although he accepts these rules, Montag is still not satisfied. He returns home and reveals a hidden stash of books that he has smuggled away from the fires. He begins to read the books for the first time. The rest of Fahrenheit 451 follows Montag through his journey towards enlightenment and knowledge, which takes him to the point of completely putting off his old life. He ends up burning down his own home on Captain Beatty's orders, and killing the Captain with the fated flamethrower. Montag flees town with the assistance of Professor Faber, and finds himself outside of the city just as planes are soaring overhead, and the threat of war has become a reality. Montag meets a man named Granger, who leads him to a group of other intellectual outcasts, whose self-appointed purpose in life is to remember the books that have vanished:

"And when they ask us what we’re doing, we can say, We’re remembering. That’s where we'll win out in the long run. And someday we'll remember so much that we'll build the biggest goddamn steamshovel in history and dig the biggest grave of all time and shove war in and cover it up."

Each of these men is assigned a book to remember. If the book is particularly long, such as the Bible, then they are assigned certain sections of the book. Montag is assigned the book of Ecclesiastes as the novel comes to a close. Since they know that they cannot print the books until the citizens of the country want to read them, the men roam the country, following the railroad tracks, remembering the forgotten and burned texts.

The fact of the matter is that the society in Fahrenheit 451 was the one responsible for the censoring of books. One by one, minority groups starting complaining about different works of literature. Eventually, it got to the point where colleges stopped teaching the humanities. Students were simply filled with the "facts." They were stuffed with information so that they felt brilliant, but were really just fountains of useless, vomited facts. This idea is mirrored in the firemen's rule book. Not only is the history of the firemen condensed down into two sentences, but they are clearly labeled as to what information is to be memorized.

Bradbury's novel portrays an image of America (perhaps some city in the midwest, near Chicago) that is not too far from our society today. According to Fahrenheit 451, the people stopped reading books of their own accord. With the proliferation of television, advertisements, and the 'sea-shell radio', people had less and less time to think for themselves. They no longer had time to read Shakespeare, Plato, or Whitman. Education became a sort of memorization and regurgitation of facts. Only when the people stopped reading did the government step in and implement the firemen, such as Montag. In a way then, the people are responsible for the violation of their own human rights.

Today's firemen do not burn books, and there is no 'watch-list' of residences with banned literature. However, our lives are getting faster by the minute, and less and less people have time to slow down, take a break from the rat race, and read a book. There are no two-hundred foot-long billboards in the city, but smaller ones light up the countryside along the thruway at night. Try and see the stars past the glare of the streetlights and
speech, press, religion, and assembly have to give up next, in order for the government to 'protect' them. Books, whether they contain 'offensive' material or not, should not be denied to the public. In this country we have been granted the freedoms of speech, press, religion, and assembly- obviously the freedom to read what one chooses can be included among these.

In more recent years, specifically since Sept 11, the rights of U.S. citizens have been slowly eaten away. With the U.S. Patriot Act of 2001, the government has access to the library records of citizens believed to be involved in terrorist acts. The government also has access to their voice-mails and e-mails. Does a government of, for, and by the people have the right to such infringements of private spheres? What rights will the people have to give up next, in order for the government to 'protect' them? Books, whether they contain 'offensive' material or not, should not be denied to the public. In this country we have been granted the freedoms of speech, press, religion, and assembly- obviously the freedom to read what one chooses can be included among these.

With all of this technological 'advancement' in mind, it is not hard to understand why some people no longer sit down and read. An apathy towards books has lent itself to the censorship of books in U.S. schools and elsewhere. Parents and community members are afraid of books putting thoughts into children's heads. In the words of Captain Beatty: "Colored people don't like Little Black Sambo. Burn it. White people don't feel good about Uncle Tom's Cabin. Burn it." If someone does not like a book, they can have it banned. If a book offends someone, or a minority, they can have it banned. If a book is giving kids ideas that their parents or the government do not approve of, simply do not teach it anymore; piece of cake. According to critic Richard Widmann:

"Contemporary America is similarly undergoing a period of "political correctness" that has touched us on every societal level. The impulse not to "offend" has resulted in the censorship of thought which breaches the limits of recently defined "good taste." The solution to politically incorrect thought is obvious in Bradbury's nightmare world" (de Koster 151).

If a book has offensive material in it, it is simply removed from the system. The extent to which this political correctness has gone, Widmann says, has left us with a society that is not allowed to think for themselves. A list of the fifty most frequently banned books in the 1990's contains ten books that I have personally read. Another seven of them are on the bookshelf, waiting for me to get around to reading them. Just before the school year starts, Barnes & Noble bookstores have a special table in the youth literature section labeled 'banned books', including classics such as To Kill a Mockingbird, Lord of the Flies, and Catcher in the Rye.

Why are these books being censored, and not taught in schools? Do we think that our children are not intelligent enough to read something objectively? Are they so intellectually impaired that whatever they read, they will believe and do? By denying access to these books we are further extending the problem. Limiting the viewpoints that children can read about only limits the viewpoints that they will be exposed to, and thus creates a narrow minded society. Furthermore, denying access to certain books directly violates the First Amendment to the Constitution- the right to freedom of the press. What the First Amendment also proclaims is a freedom of religion. I would like to extend this idea of 'religion' to the concept of beliefs or ideas. Censoring literature is a blatant denial of the right to free thought.
In reality, Bradbury's America in *Fahrenheit 451* is not all that different from the one we live in today. The 'seashell radios', interactive TV, fast cars, advertisements, and even the threat of war are all things that pervade our society. In places such as Germany and even Canada, "firemen" were present at the scenes of fires which destroyed publishing firms and individuals' homes (de Koster 155). We in the U.S. have not gotten to the point yet where we literally burn books (although there were times in the 1950's that we were close to it), but if censorship and apathy towards books continues in the decades ahead, there is definitely the possibility of eliminating printed books entirely.

Today, authors worldwide are having trouble finding publishers brave enough to touch their manuscripts. Those publishers are finding printers closing their presses to controversial works. And published works are being censored, banned, and burned (de Koster 156). Widmann sums up today's world:

"We are supposed to occupy our minds with sports on big-screen TV's, video arcades, fast food, cellular phones to occupy our minds while traveling, laptop computers and even on-flight computer games. Computerized "chat-rooms" that enable us to "speak" to faceless strangers are all the rage. How far are we from Bradbury's broadcast TV "families"?"(de Koster 156).

It's a plain and simple fact that book censorship is a violation of the rights granted to us as citizens of the United States. How much longer will we sit idly by and watch as book after book is blacklisted? If the people do not oppose the censorship of books, then they will be as guilty as the society in *Fahrenheit 451*. Books enlighten and inform; they are the thoughts of those who have gone before us, and there is a wealth of knowledge in their experiences. They are the voices of the past, guiding us to the future - they should not be shut off.

Bradbury wrote his version of America during the early 1950s in the context of McCarthyism and the Cold War. Today, with the war in Iraq and the constant effort to be politically correct, I see our America coming closer and closer to that of *Fahrenheit 451*. Book censorship as outlined in Bradbury's text has major societal implications. Without books, people are unable to think for themselves. They are pawns, which the government can fill with whatever information or ideas that it so chooses. If book censorship continues, and private spheres are further violated, then I see no reason why our society will not become like that of *Fahrenheit 451*. Who knows, maybe some day our firemen will burn books, too.