**Fahrenheit 451**

**Ray Bradbury**

Plot Overview

Guy Montag is a fireman who burns books in a futuristic American city. In Montag’s world, firemen start fires rather than putting them out. The people in this society do not read books, enjoy nature, spend time by themselves, think independently, or have meaningful conversations. Instead, they drive very fast, watch excessive amounts of television on wall-size sets, and listen to the radio on “Seashell Radio” sets attached to their ears.

Montag encounters a gentle seventeen-year-old girl named Clarisse McClellan, who opens his eyes to the emptiness of his life with her innocently penetrating questions and her unusual love of people and nature. Over the next few days, Montag experiences a series of disturbing events. First, his wife, Mildred, attempts suicide by swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills. Then, when he responds to an alarm that an old woman has a stash of hidden literature, the woman shocks him by choosing to be burned alive along with her books. A few days later, he hears that Clarisse has been killed by a speeding car. Montag’s dissatisfaction with his life increases, and he begins to search for a solution in a stash of books that he has stolen from his own fires and hidden inside an air-conditioning vent.

When Montag fails to show up for work, his fire chief, Beatty, pays a visit to his house. Beatty explains that it’s normal for a fireman to go through a phase of wondering what books have to offer, and he delivers a dizzying monologue explaining how books came to be banned in the first place. According to Beatty, special-interest groups and other “minorities” objected to books that offended them. Soon, books all began to look the same, as writers tried to avoid offending anybody. This was not enough, however, and society as a whole decided to simply burn books rather than permit conflicting opinions. Beatty tells Montag to take twenty-four hours or so to see if his stolen books contain anything worthwhile and then turn them in for incineration. Montag begins a long and frenzied night of reading.

Overwhelmed by the task of reading, Montag looks to his wife for help and support, but she prefers television to her husband’s company and cannot understand why he would want to take the terrible risk of reading books. He remembers that he once met a retired English professor named Faber sitting in a park, and he decides that this man might be able to help him understand what he reads. He visits Faber, who tells him that the value of books lies in the detailed awareness of life that they contain. Faber says that Montag needs not only books but also the leisure to read them and the freedom to act upon their ideas.

Faber agrees to help Montag with his reading, and they concoct a risky scheme to overthrow the status quo. Faber will contact a printer and begin reproducing books, and Montag will plant books in the homes of firemen to discredit the profession and to destroy the machinery of censorship. Faber gives him a two-way radio earpiece (the “green bullet”) so that he can hear what Montag hears and talk to him secretly.

Montag goes home, and soon two of his wife’s friends arrive to watch television. The women discuss their families and the war that is about to be declared in an extremely frivolous manner. Their superficiality angers him, and he takes out a book of poetry and reads “Dover Beach”by Matthew Arnold. Faber buzzes in his ear for him to be quiet, and Mildred tries to explain that the poetry reading is a standard way for firemen to demonstrate the uselessness of literature. The women are extremely disturbed by the poem and leave to file a complaint against Montag.

Montag goes to the fire station and hands over one of his books to Beatty. Beatty confuses Montag by barraging him with contradictory quotations from great books. Beatty exploits these contradictions to show that literature is morbid and dangerously complex, and that it deserves incineration. Suddenly, the alarm sounds, and they rush off to answer the call, only to find that the alarm is at Montag’s own house. Mildred gets into a cab with her suitcase, and Montag realizes that his own wife has betrayed him.

Beatty forces Montag to burn the house himself; when he is done, Beatty places him under arrest. When Beatty continues to berate Montag, Montag turns the flamethrower on his superior and proceeds to burn him to ashes. Montag knocks the other firemen unconscious and runs. The Mechanical Hound, a monstrous machine that Beatty has set to attack Montag, pounces and injects Montag’s leg with a large dose of anesthetic. Montag manages to destroy it with his flamethrower; then he walks off the numbness in his leg and escapes with some books that were hidden in his backyard. He hides these in another fireman’s house and calls in an alarm from a pay phone.

Montag goes to Faber’s house, where he learns that a new Hound has been put on his trail, along with several helicopters and a television crew. Faber tells Montag that he is leaving for St. Louis to see a retired printer who may be able to help them. Montag gives Faber some money and tells him how to remove Montag’s scent from his house so the Hound will not enter it. Montag then takes some of Faber’s old clothes and runs off toward the river. The whole city watches as the chase unfolds on TV, but Montag manages to escape in the river and change into Faber’s clothes to disguise his scent. He drifts downstream into the country and follows a set of abandoned railroad tracks until he finds a group of renegade intellectuals (“the Book People”), led by a man named Granger, who welcome him. They are a part of a nationwide network of book lovers who have memorized many great works of literature and philosophy. They hope that they may be of some help to mankind in the aftermath of the war that has just been declared. Montag’s role is to memorize the Book of Ecclesiastes. Enemy jets appear in the sky and completely obliterate the city with bombs. Montag and his new friends move on to search for survivors and rebuild civilization.

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**Analysis of Major Characters**

**Guy Montag** - A third-generation fireman who suddenly realizes the emptiness of his life and starts to search for meaning in the books he is supposed to be burning. Though he is sometimes rash and has a hard time thinking for himself, he is determined to break free from the oppression of ignorance. He quickly forms unusually strong attachments with anyone who seems receptive to true friendship. His biggest regret in life is not having a better relationship with his wife.

**Mildred Montag** - Montag’s brittle, sickly looking wife. She is obsessed with watching television and refuses to engage in frank conversation with her husband about their marriage or her feelings. Her suicide attempt, which she refuses even to acknowledge, clearly indicates that she harbors a great deal of pain. Small-minded and childish, Mildred does not understand her husband and apparently has no desire to do so.

**Captain Beatty** - The captain of Montag’s fire department. Although he is himself extremely well-read, paradoxically he hates books and people who insist on reading them. He is cunning and devious, and so perceptive that he appears to read Montag’s thoughts.

**Professor Faber** - A retired English professor whom Montag encountered a year before the book opens. Faber still possesses a few precious books and aches to have more. He readily admits that the current state of society is due to the cowardice of people like himself, who would not speak out against book burning when they still could have stopped it. He berates himself for being a coward, but he shows himself capable of acts that require great courage and place him in considerable danger.

**Clarisse McClellan** - A beautiful seventeen-year-old who introduces Montag to the world’s potential for beauty and meaning with her gentle innocence and curiosity. She is an outcast from society because of her odd habits, which include hiking, playing with flowers, and asking questions, but she and her (equally odd) family seem genuinely happy with themselves and each other.

**Granger** - The leader of the “Book People,” the group of hobo intellectuals Montag finds in the country. Granger is intelligent, patient, and confident in the strength of the human spirit. He is committed to preserving literature through the current Dark Age.

**Mrs. Phelps** - One of Mildred’s vapid friends. She is emotionally disconnected from her life, appearing unconcerned when her third husband is sent off to war. Yet she breaks down crying when Montag reads her a poem, revealing suppressed feelings and sensibilities.

**Mrs. Bowles** - One of Mildred’s friends. Like Mrs. Phelps, she does not seem to care deeply about her own miserable life, which includes one divorce, one husband killed in an accident, one husband who commits suicide, and two children who hate her. Both of Mildred’s friends are represented as typical specimens of their society.

**Stoneman and Black** - Two firemen who work with Montag. They share the lean, shadowed look common to all firemen and go about their jobs unquestioningly.