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The Parable of Witness in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

Steven Gollmer

It's hard to over-appreciate firefighters. The role they play in protecting citizens from harm cannot be overstated. But what if that role were subverted to control minds rather than protect bodies? This is the premise of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, in which the greatest danger to stable society is a free-thinking populace.

The Firefighter

Montag was a firefighter. He and his unit would instantly respond to any emergency, sliding down the fire pole, revving up the fire engine, and taking to the streets. But in Bradbury's novel, the role of the firefighter has changed significantly. They fight not against fire, but with it.

The tools of Montag's trade are ax, kerosene and lighter. When a hidden library or cache of books were discovered, the firefighters were called. They stormed the building, breaking down doors and hidden walls to expose the offensive material. Shakespeare, Byron, Thoreau, the Bible, the writings of Confucius, the Constitution were all the same; sources of ideas that make people think and reflect on the value and purpose of life. As Montag's Fire Chief explains, a pluralistic society with diverse ideas and opinions tears itself apart. The firefighter now has a higher calling: to restore order by removing the sources of destructive ideas. The books they find are set alight and wither in flame.

Protecting Society

Firefighters were not the only vanguard to protect society. Entertainment catering to the whims of the populous was readily available. Fast cars and interactive video provided the thrills and social interaction necessary for a person to feel fulfilled. Conversations with real people revolved around the present and what would be served up on the next video episode. Montag had three walls of his parlor covered with video panels and his wife was pressing him to purchase a fourth so she could have a fully immersive experience with her family. “Her family” was the derisive term Montag gave to the actors his wife interacted with on the videos. When not interacting with “the family,” his wife plugged in her seashells, what we would call earbuds.

Such a lifestyle left many empty and despairing of life, so a medical squad was on call to manage attempted suicides. It was not that anyone actively attempted suicide, but thoughtlessly going through life caused it to happen accidentally and often. A life full of stimulus made it hard to fall asleep. Drifting in and out of sleep under the background sounds of the seashells, it was common to use sleeping pills to aid in the effort. When waking again before morning, one may ask, “was there a need for another sleeping pill” or “did I even take a sleeping pill in the first place?” After an accidental overdose, the squad is called, the stomach is pumped, a transfusion to cleanse the blood is administered, and the patient awakens the next morning, none the wiser to the events of the previous night. One such episode happened to Montag’s wife.

The Unsettled Soul

His wife’s overdose scare merely punctuated Montag’s discontentment with life. Her preoccupation with trivial matters and disengagement from reality reminded him of the emptiness in his own life. Adding to this was the allure of the forbidden. What could be so dangerous about books? Having secretly taken books from fire scenes over the years, Montag hid them in his home, though not having the courage to read them or even open them.

During this conflicted time in Montag's life, Fire Chief Beatty served as a mentor. Beatty saw right through Montag, knowing his struggles and anticipating his actions. It was clear that Beatty was well read, implying that he not only took books but read them thoroughly. From this knowledgeable position, Beatty warned about the subversive effect of conflicting ideas. He related to Montag that censorship did not come by governmental decree but through people's loss of interest in learning and libraries. Individuals who maintained and displayed their curiosity were labeled with the swearword, 'intellectual.' In the hands of an intellectual "a book is a loaded gun" and must be removed, lest someone feel inferior. As a result, by burning books firemen became the "custodians of our peace of mind."

Impact of Witnesses

Had the interactions in Montag's life been restricted to his wife, Beatty, and his duties as firefighter, he would have endured this shallow, empty life none the wiser. However, the faithful witness of unassuming people had earth-shattering consequences. For Montag, the first witness was a young woman, Clarisse. She had recently become Montag's neighbor and shook him with such a simple question, "Are you happy?" She lived her life engaged with the world around her. She made observations, asked questions, and seemed to be in love with life. Such behavior was considered abnormal, and questions were asked whether she should be institutionalized. Although Clarisse mysteriously disappears several weeks later, her impact on Montag was immense.

A second witness strikes a more serious blow to Montag's satisfaction of life by making him question what he is willing to die for. An anonymous elderly woman's home was raided. Normally, she would have been removed by the police prior to the firemen's arrival. But there she was, remaining silent among the ruckus of the firemen, as they shoveled piles of books from the second story down the staircase. As Montag attempts to pull her from the scene, everything is doused with kerosene. While kneeling among her books, the woman produces a kitchen match and sets everything ablaze.

These two witnesses initiate a cascade of events that lead Montag away from his previously comfortable but empty life. No longer satisfied with shallow reality that catered only to his immediate and superficial needs, Montag seeks meaning. Fleeing for his life, he escapes the city to wander anonymously among bums and outcasts. It is here that he meets Granger. Prior to the mandated burning of books, Granger was an author. He introduces Montag to other outcasts: a professor, a philosopher, and a pastor. These and many others form a wandering community that memorizes books and passes their knowledge on to others. They bear messages that will be needed to rebuild a broken world when it is ready to listen.

Message Bearers

Fahrenheit 451 has all the elements common to dystopian stories. Something is seriously wrong with the world. Practically alone, the protagonist comes to the realization that something needs to change and embarks upon a journey, liberating himself and others from the soul-destroying system in which they are caught. What distinguishes Bradbury's story from others is the juxtaposition of Montag's heroic efforts with the simple, quiet, faithful lives of the witnesses. The witnesses live out the reality of what they believe, regardless of the consequences. For Clarisse it is a childlike, naive faith. For the immolated woman it is the hopelessness of life without the truth. For the enclave of individuals who had memorized books, it is the knowledge that the message they carried would one day be needed.

Fahrenheit 451 was written to address the tragedy of a thoughtless life and the role of censorship in the process. Despite Bradbury's eclectic view of religion, this novel acts as a parable illustrating II Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." Bradbury's treasure was the creative thoughts of mankind throughout the ages, but our treasure is far superior. It is the Word of God which has the power to save those who believe. The value of witnesses is not inherent in themselves, but in the message they bear, a message that must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:19-20).