



The Dark and Starry Eyes of Ray Bradbury

Lauren Weiner

The ebullient Ray Bradbury often gave the impression that if anyone could defeat mortality, it would be he. Alas, the “poet of the pulps” died in June at age ninety-one at his home in Los Angeles. He left legions of devoted readers and a vast oeuvre that, at its best, combined Hobbesian fears with emotionally resonant hopes for his country and for the human race.

The author of eleven novels and some six hundred stories called his around-the-clock writing habits “my choreography to outwit Death.” And dance he did. His Herculean output included stories, screenplays, novels, radio plays, and theatrical pieces in the fantasy, science fiction, horror, and detective genres, as well as myriad essays and a first-rate 1956 movie adaptation of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Bradbury sought the lasting fame and glory that artists want, but seldom has the urgency of that quest comported so well with the subject matter that the artist chose. Or, to put it as he would have, that chose him.

Bradbury made his finest contributions to American fiction early in his career. They include his story “The Night” (1946) and his first and great-

est novel, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), which he built up from an already-published short story. *Dark Carnival* (1947), *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), *The Illustrated Man* (1951), and *Dandelion Wine* (1957), all of which contain dazzling interludes, were brought out as novels but were really strung-together groups of new and previously published stories.

Because he was a lifelong reviser, many of these “greatest hits,” or pieces of them, remain in print today in a half-dozen variations. Truth be told, the proportion of greatest hits among his more forgettable works is not high. Yet the effect Bradbury has had is as potent as that of creators like L. Frank Baum, Rod Serling, and Steven Spielberg—probably as potent as all three combined, considering the large swaths of American popular culture he is father to. Filmmakers who cite his influence include Spielberg, David Lynch, James Cameron, and *Back to the Future* screenwriter Bob Gale. In television, he inspired Serling (and directly contributed ideas and scripts to Serling’s *The Twilight Zone*) and indirectly shaped such Baby Boom-era touchstones as *Star Trek*, *The Addams Family*, and *Dark Shadows*. Any number of wildly successful books and

movies—Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* and J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, to name two—are unthinkable without Bradbury. And in the words of the prolific American horror writer Stephen King, “without Ray Bradbury, there *is* no Stephen King.”

The youthful experiences that made Bradbury into a writer preoccupied him throughout his life. Bradbury’s much-beloved novel *Dandelion Wine* is a thinly veiled fictionalization of many of his sweeter reminiscences—but even these could take an odd turn. “I loved to watch my grandmother eviscerate the turkey,” he once said, a memory that sums up his most characteristic literary trait: taking homey Americana and bending it in a violent or grotesque direction. His most seminal stories wrung terror out of common occurrences, such as going into a ravine that ran through the residential section of his native Waukegan, Illinois at nighttime. In the story “The Night,” an eight-year-old boy—the author’s alter-ego—simply scares himself. There is no ghost or criminal lurking, only the panic that wells up in all of us when we get lost in a dark, damp place and know we are alone in the universe, in the “vast swelling loneliness,” feeling the presence of “an ogre called Death.”

Bradbury spent his childhood goosing his imagination with the outlandish. Whenever mundane Waukegan was visited by the strange or the offbeat, young Ray was on hand.

The vaudevillian magician Harry Blackstone came through the industrial port on Lake Michigan’s shore in the late 1920s. Seeing Blackstone’s show over and over again marked Bradbury deeply, as did going to carnivals and circuses, and watching Hollywood’s earliest horror offerings like *Dracula* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. He read heavily in Charles Dickens, George Bernard Shaw, Edgar Allan Poe, H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, L. Frank Baum, and Edgar Rice Burroughs; the latter’s inspirational and romantic children’s adventure tales earned him Bradbury’s hyperbolic designation as “probably the most influential writer in the entire history of the world.”

Then there was the contagious enthusiasm of Bradbury’s bohemian, artistic aunt and his grandfather, Samuel, who ran a boardinghouse in Waukegan and instilled in Bradbury a kind of wonder at modern life. He recounted: “When I was two years old I sat on his knee and he had me tickle a crystal with a feathery needle and I heard music from thousands of miles away. I was right then and there introduced to the birth of radio.”

His family’s temporary stay in Arizona in the mid-1920s and permanent relocation to Los Angeles in the 1930s brought Bradbury to the desert places that he would later reimagine as Mars. As a high-schooler he buzzed around movie and radio stars asking for autographs, briefly considered becoming an actor, and wrote and edited science fiction “fanzines”

I. The Major Works of Ray Bradbury

Since Bradbury's books are available in multiple editions, this partial list includes only the original year of publication.

- *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) - *Dandelion Wine* (1957)
- *The Illustrated Man* (1951) - *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962)
- *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) - *Farewell Summer* (2006)

II. The Stories of Ray Bradbury

Many of Bradbury's short stories have been collected in books—sometimes repeatedly. These are the best and most comprehensive collections:

The Collected Stories of Ray Bradbury, A Critical Edition: Volume 1, 1938–1943
Kent State ~ 2010 ~ 332 pp. ~ \$65 (cloth)

The Stories of Ray Bradbury
Knopf ~ 2010 (orig. 1980) ~ 884 pp. ~ \$32 (cloth)

Bradbury Stories
William Morrow ~ 2003 ~ 893 pp. ~ \$29.95 (cloth) \$17.99 (paper)

III. Other Resources

The writings of Ray Bradbury have spawned a veritable industry of scholarly publications and activities; here is a small sample, emphasizing literary biography:

The Center for Ray Bradbury Studies (School of Liberal Arts, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis), home of *The New Ray Bradbury Review* (published by Kent State): iupui.edu/~crbs/

The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury ~ By Sam Weller
William Morrow ~ 2006 ~ 384 pp. ~ \$26.95 (cloth) \$16.99 (paper)

Listen to the Echoes: The Ray Bradbury Interviews ~ By Sam Weller
Melville House ~ 2010 ~ 317 pp. ~ \$18.95 (paper)

Becoming Ray Bradbury ~ By Jonathan R. Eller
Illinois ~ 2011 ~ 324 pp. ~ \$34.95 (cloth)

Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction
By Jonathan R. Eller and William F. Touponce
Kent State ~ 2004 ~ 570 pp. ~ \$38 (cloth)

Bradbury Speaks: Too Soon from the Cave, Too Far from the Stars
By Ray Bradbury
William Morrow ~ 2005 ~ 243 pp. ~ \$25.95 (cloth) \$14.95 (paper)

just as tales of robots and rocket ships were gaining in popularity in wartime America. He befriended the staffs of bicoastal pulp magazines like *Weird Tales*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Dime Mystery*, and *Captain Future* by bombarding them with submissions, and, when those were rejected, with letters to the editor. This precocity was typical. Science fiction and “fantasy”—a catchall term for tales of the supernatural that have few or no fancy machines in them—drew adolescent talent like no other sector of American publishing. Isaac Asimov was in his late teens when he began writing for genre publications; Ursula K. Le Guin claimed to have sent in stories from the age of eleven.

By working furiously on his style, and by following the advice of mentors like the science fiction writer Robert Heinlein and Norman Corwin, the radio writer and CBS programming powerhouse, Bradbury conquered the pulps, but did not stop there. In 1945, when he was twenty-five, his fiction began appearing in the “slicks,” national magazines of mass-circulation like *McCall's*, *Collier's*, *Mademoiselle*, and *The New Yorker*. Upscale readers liked genre potboilers for the same reason that the buyers of cheap fanzines did. Many of us enjoy peeking at the bad thing that happened. The enjoyment lies in the fact that it did not happen to us, who lie tucked in a warm bed reading our genre fiction (by flashlight, if it is past our bedtime).

Bradbury's efforts to slake the middle class's middlebrow taste for the lurid took him way over the top at times, into manic word-explosions— attempts to knock the reader's socks off that are rather impenetrable. At other times his verbal intensity got things just right. Here is the approach of a *Tyrannosaurus rex* in “A Sound of Thunder” (1952):

It came on great oiled, resilient, striding legs. It towered thirty feet above half of the trees, a great evil god, folding its delicate watchmaker's claws close to its oily reptilian chest. Each lower leg was a piston, a thousand pounds of white bone, sunk in thick ropes of muscle, sheathed over in a gleam of pebbled skin like the mail of a terrible warrior.

Bradburian versions of the monster classics could be inspiring. (Bob Gale loved the time-travel story just quoted; his 1985 screenplay no doubt got its title from words found there: “back to the Future.”) But Bradbury blazed his own trail when he developed a way of starting off with the familiar human scenes, then warping them. A rain barrel, that wholesome item of rural or small-town existence, in a Bradbury story is likely to have festering above it an ominous swarm of insects. The floor of the local barbershop is being swept of hair clippings by a boy, and the boy ruminates about the fuzzy piles of hair having gotten there by growing organically

from the white tiles. Or, in *Fahrenheit 451*, Granger's sentimental reminiscence about his grandfather, a role model dead these many years, is punctuated by this grotesque image: "If you lifted my skull, by God, in the convolutions of my brain you'd find the big ridges of his thumbprint."

This aesthetic, which we could call conflating Waukegan with the weird, produced some of Bradbury's most accomplished pieces. Creating individual personalities from the inside was not his strong suit. Instead, he excelled at viewing humanity from the middle distance. These glimpses can be all the more lyrical for being tinged with sadness. In the story "Hail and Farewell" (1953), it is summer, and boys are in a field tossing a ball around:

How tall they stood to the sun. In the last few months it seemed the sun had passed a hand above their heads, beckoned, and they were warm metal drawn melting upward; they were golden taffy pulled by an immense gravity to the sky, thirteen, fourteen years old, looking down upon Willie, smiling, but already beginning to neglect him.

This prosaic scene has a twist: Willie looks like a boy but is in fact forty-three years old. He is a loner hiding his freakishness, roaming the towns of the Midwest and being adopted by a childless couple here and there, until his lack of growth

draws attention to his secret and he must pull up stakes. An intense awareness of the sands of time leaving the hourglass drives Bradbury to try to capture fleeting moments. He is in love with the sweetness of youth. Yet we see in "Hail and Farewell" that this passion coexists with—is balanced by—Bradbury's decent, Midwestern sense of moral limits. Willie, through no desire of his own, has gained eternal youth. It is no blessing. It puts him tragically out of step with his fellow human beings. Bradbury further developed this theme years later in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962). Much of the novel centers on a carousel that changes the rider's age, giving youth to the old and age to the young. At best, those who take the ride end up miserable outcasts. At worst, they become soulless monsters. If eternal youth is no blessing, neither is a return to what has been outgrown, or an impatient leap to what has not yet been grown into. Time is precious, Bradbury believed, *because* it is fleeting; using science to stop or control aging would be more nightmarish than fulfilling.

Bradbury was not pessimistic about man's fate, but he was famously leery of technology getting the upper hand and controlling its creators. Human habitations preoccupied him, from the small-town Gothic Victorians of his Illinois fictions to the sleek, appliance-filled

suburban homes of his futuristic works. The hyper-modern dwelling of “There Will Come Soft Rains” (1950, collected in *The Martian Chronicles*) functions perpetually, without its deceased owners, until destroyed in a blaze that its automated systems cannot put out. Old Victorian residences, in contrast, radiate a sense of history and family warmth even (or perhaps especially) if they are a little run-down—it was Americans of modest means, not the wealthy, who mattered to Bradbury. Childhood is richest in joys and fears in a tree-surrounded place, worn and crooked and full of nooks and crannies. American Gothic to him meant placing a rather sweet family of vampires in a creaky northern Illinois manse. (They are raising a human foundling in “Homecoming” [1946], his homage to Burroughs’s Tarzan.)

Domiciles matter as well in Bradbury’s masterwork, *Fahrenheit 451*, a dystopia about a future society where no books are allowed. Its hero, Guy Montag, is a dissident member of the fire brigade that goes around incinerating books, along with the houses in which they are found. Disillusioned with his empty way of life, and with the brutality of his profession, Montag begins illegally reading books and hiding them in his home. He is found out by his villainous boss, the fire chief. With his neighbors looking on, Montag is forced by the fire chief to burn down his own house:

The house fell in red coals and black ash. It bedded itself down in sleepy pink-gray cinders and a smoke plume blew over it, rising and waving slowly back and forth in the sky. It was three-thirty in the morning. The crowd drew back into the houses; the great tents of the circus had slumped into charcoal and rubble and the show was well over.

The novel’s premise—that a community’s helpers, men who quelled fires and saved lives, are now tasked with state-authorized arson—is a perverse joke. Montag wants to recover the suppressed history of his society, for he wonders how things could have come to such a pass. This is of course just what readers wonder. Therefore we get a reference to the advent of new technology, some time ago, whereby “houses were finally fireproofed completely, all over the world.” That freed up the crews down at the fire stations to be “given [a] new job, as custodians of our peace of mind,” keeping down “well-read men,” intellectuals, and other dangerous types by eradicating their books. If this strikes anybody as a Band-Aid-like contrivance for a tale with a fanciful premise, that’s because it is.

Just as Bradbury was not picky about issues of plausibility, he lacked the high-tech fixation that is typical of the science fiction genre. Obviously he liked gadgets—starting with that crystal radio set back in

Waukegan—but their secondary status shows in *Fahrenheit 451*. One of the men involved in a dissident underground, Faber, invents a tiny device through which to secretly help his protégé, Montag, but when this gizmo is discovered and destroyed, no one in the novel makes anything of the loss. It just goes away. Normally science fiction writers will not casually discard such a marvel. Or if they do, they contrive the precious object's dramatic reappearance, perhaps in a sequel to the original work (or all too often in a tiresome sequel to the sequel). One of Bradbury's biographers, Sam Weller, said "the purists, in their myopic love affair with hardware," fail to appreciate that Bradbury wrote "human stories dressed in the baroque accoutrements of his early science fiction influences."

For all that, he made his share, along with others from science fiction's golden age, of great technological guesses. It is astonishing to come across not-yet-invented devices like ear buds (called "seashells") and 24/7 banking services in *Fahrenheit 451*. A proto-iPod appears in Bradbury's 1948 story "The Women." Such previewed novelties, if we can call them that, are attention-grabbing. Whether Bradbury was the very first in print with any of these is probably debatable; what is not debatable is his wisdom about how they would affect our lives. Uncanny in this regard is the 1953 story "The Murderer."

A man who went berserk later explains to the prison psychiatrist his feeling of being oppressed by his radio wristwatch, which has a telephone in it. "What is there about such 'conveniences' that makes them so *temptingly* convenient?" he asks woefully. He goes on:

"I love my friends, my wife, humanity, very much, but when one minute my wife calls to say, 'Where are you *now*, dear?' and a friend calls and says, 'Got the best off-color joke to tell you'.... [a]nd a stranger calls and cries out, 'This is the Find-Fax Poll. What gum are you chewing at this very *instant*?' Well!"

Bradbury intuited that progress would exact a price in personal annoyance, loss of freedom, and alienation. Family disharmony, too—that is clear in "The Veldt," one of the futuristic vignettes in *The Illustrated Man*. The story is about two children whose nursery has a virtual-reality techno-fantasyland installed in it. Worried that the kids are too absorbed in their entertainment, their father and mother apply what would later be termed parental controls. The kids do not take kindly to this interference and use the technology to kill them.

Friction between children and parents, and between husbands and wives, recurs often in Bradbury's fiction. While his thoughts on the

cultural effects of technology were eerily prescient about our own time, matrimonial discord is part of the “period” quality of his most beloved works. Bradbury and other pulp writers, whether consciously or not, updated Edgar Rice Burroughs and H. G. Wells for postwar America. This was the era of Ralph and Alice Kramden, the working-class couple in Jackie Gleason’s television comedy, and of the more upscale and suburban “battle of the sexes” stylized in Madison Avenue ad campaigns and *New Yorker* cartoons. The average mid-twentieth-century American male was depicted in terms that in retrospect look terribly stark: as a hemmed-in creature with an unfulfilling job out in “the rat race” and a wife ruling the roost at home. The high-toned literature of the time, as Christopher Lasch pointed out in his book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), likewise reflected anxiety about the “domineering woman.” Lasch saw this in the work of such writers as Vladimir Nabokov, Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, Philip Roth, and “the joyless humor of James Thurber.”

Science fiction and fantasy writers like Bradbury and Philip K. Dick offered their own take on the contemporary “battle of the sexes.” Their protagonists—whose careers were not going well and whose spouses, given names like Madge, Millie, or Elma, were persons of off-putting silliness or harshness or

both—desperately needed something in their lives to change. Procurement of a mysterious “thing” in a jar; an alien visitation; or a sudden, inexplicable transference to another dimension (or, in Guy Montag’s case, a kind of political awakening) usually did the trick.

So handy was this off-the-shelf construct that Bradbury took it to Mars. Seeing the comic possibilities in conflation, Bradbury made his aliens bourgeois. He indulged his domicile-centric imagination, giving us a Red Planet on which Martian men and their dissatisfied Martian wives lived in elegant desert homes in high-tech comfort and were buried in graveyards when they died. *The Martian Chronicles*, about the planet’s invasion by Earthlings, naturally enough begins with the invaders’ arrival. That arrival is heralded in a wonderfully “period” way, through Mr. and Mrs. K and their relationship problems:

Mr. and Mrs. K were not old. They had the fair, brownish skin of the true Martian, the yellow coin eyes, the soft musical voices. Once they had liked painting pictures with chemical fire, swimming in the canals in the seasons when the wine trees filled them with green liquors, and talking into the dawn together by the blue phosphorous portraits in the speaking room.

They were not happy now.

She, the typical Martian wife, cooks over a lava-bubbling stove while her husband pursues cerebral hobbies in another room, venturing out to field and stream for recreational hunting when the mood takes him. Mrs. K has longings that Mr. K does not understand. Her “emotional wailing” irritates him. He gets jealous when she starts dreaming of a tall, handsome stranger. Mrs. K has the telepathy of all Martians and has inadvertently picked up that, indeed, someone is coming who fits that description. Mr. K’s jealousy increases—“When’s he landing? Where’s he coming down with his damned ship?”—and out the door he goes with his hunting weapon to shoot dead the first human being who sets foot on Mars. Former watchers of Saturday-morning cartoons can see in Bradbury’s fanciful mash-up the basic construct used by William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, the former MGM animators who created a Stone Age couple (*The Flintstones*) and a Space Age couple (*The Jetsons*) who were, for all intents and purposes, American suburbanites.

One could overdo it with the irritable householder and the bored hausfrau, and Bradbury did. That he would recur too frequently to this stock setup to furnish his main characters with personal lives was perhaps understandable, however. Delving deeper than that might have led into matters of the heart. Or even sex. The Bradbury corpus contains

many lurid touches but they are of the gross-out variety, not the risqué. He differs in that regard from writers like Heinlein and also Roald Dahl, to whom he is in other ways comparable. It makes sense for him to have played it safe out of solicitude for the tender age of a large segment of his audience, but it would also seem that for Bradbury, mixing sexual fantasies into fantasy writing simply held little appeal. His adventurous quality is boyish in the manner of the classic Anglo-American authors—Kipling, Stevenson, Cooper, and Twain. “The idea of making believe appeals to him much more than the idea of making love,” said Henry James of his friend Robert Louis Stevenson. Based on his writings, the same could have been said of Bradbury.

He filled his stories with inventor-wizards ranging from the adventurous to the purely deluded. “The Fire Balloons” (a 1951 story incorporated into later editions of *The Martian Chronicles*) features Father Peregrine, who may be the most compelling of this type. Father Peregrine is among those chosen when Planet Earth—which, in Bradburyland, means the United States of America—sends a team of missionaries to Mars to save the souls of the indigenous population. By this time the Martians, having lost control of their planet, are scarce and reclusive like the Plains Indians of North America. They represent freedom and lofty spirituality, and Father Peregrine yearns to know them. He

shocks his fellow missionaries by going up the mountainside and building an altar that replaces the cross with a globe, the better to draw the Martians from the wilderness. He has intuited what the right signals are—not only his special construction project but the organ music he sends wafting into the upper atmosphere. The Martians reward this sympathetic human with a rare contact. An excited and wonder-struck Father Peregrine says meeting these ethereal beings confirms what he already sensed: “They know. They understand... They think and judge and live in a moral climate.” Just add mashed potatoes, a beautiful film score, and Richard Dreyfuss—and you’ve got Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Invention, wonder, and amazement can make captivating fiction (and movies) but they are not a philosophy. Bradbury worked and reworked his prose to get the most powerful descriptive images, and shuffled and reshuffled parts of novels in search of the most artistically satisfying arrangement, yet he was a less than systematic thinker. He relied on common sense even when seeming to be exploring the sophisticated world of ideas. Many a Bradbury character will launch into a mini-discourse *à la* George Bernard Shaw (Shaw’s plays were a major inspiration for him), but these excursions, studded with references to Dante, Swift, and Marcus

Aurelius, or to Darwin, Huxley, and Freud, are often stilted. The speech at the heart of *The Martian Chronicles* from Jeff Spender, the astronaut who turns against his cohorts, is an example of impossibly learned philosophical arguments from Bradbury’s characters. Spender’s diatribe does not lend his character much believability, but we do see his frustration as justified. His fellow Earthmen, who have landed on Mars blithely expecting the Martians’ obeisance, who careen around loud, drunk, and disorderly, and who even litter, need to be shown a better path. The Martians follow that better path, Spender has discovered. He has explored their beautiful art and artifacts and studied their cultural records. The Martians live in concert with nature; they “quit trying too hard to destroy everything, to humble everything.” Whereas mankind has become stymied by falling into the conviction that Darwinian evolution and religious faith are incompatible, the Martians, says Spender, “knew how to combine science and religion so the two worked side by side, neither denying the other, each enriching the other.”

Politically libertarian or left-wing science fiction writers, like Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dune* author Frank Herbert, or Philip K. Dick, who adopted the critique of neo-imperialist capitalism that was in vogue in the 1960s, might have given the last word to the guy who “goes native.” Not our

Midwestern middle-of-the-roader, Ray Bradbury. The ecologists have a decent point, but they shouldn't go too far—this we see from the fact that angry Jeff Spender takes off on a rampage, killing his boorish crew-mates, forcing his captain to order his death. Spender is one of several violent radicals in Bradbury's fiction who get their comeuppance.

Guy Montag, too, contemplates armed insurrection against the state in *Fahrenheit 451*. He is guided by his mentors to see that quiet perseverance is preferable to revolution. For Bradbury, culture is usually the problem—culture as affected by technology—not the decisions of the powers that be. Even *Fahrenheit 451*, which is about an evil regime, is in a sense an apolitical work. The government that tries to quash the last remnants of independent thought is not so much imposing its will as it is fulfilling the wishes of a degenerate society. It was not oppressive government policies, but decisions of the people, under the influence of technologies that sped up human experience too much, that undermined humanistic values and intellectual curiosity in the first place. Not state censorship, but a more general failure to value the mind, the imagination, nature, and a civilization's hard-won insights, is the main target of criticism in that novel.

If the message reveals a certain conservatism or traditionalism in Bradbury, his liberal side cannot be

denied either. He spoke wistfully, through his characters and in person, of achieving a world without war, sounding very much the soft-headed progressive at those times. On a personal level, he freely admitted his fear of going into the U.S. Army in 1941 and his relief when his poor eyesight exempted him from possibly having to die for his country. His work reflects the atomic angst and even bears touches of the moral equivalence of the political left in the Cold War. In "The Last Night of the World" (1951, collected in *The Illustrated Man*), a nuclear holocaust is coming because the logic of the superpowers' arms race is playing out, not because any state (the Soviet Union is never mentioned) fomented an aggressive ideology.

As the critic Paul Briens has written, a kind of "muscular disarmament" is visited upon Earth in *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Martian Chronicles*. Thermonuclear apocalypse is a tragedy that Bradbury sees as ultimately salutary, a wiping away of the mess we've gotten ourselves into. He even dared play it for comic effect. In *The Martian Chronicles*, nuclear war on faraway Earth occurs late in the book, but incidentally rather than as the grand finale. Just as the arrival of *Homo sapiens* on Mars was subsumed into situation comedy, so is this: A former astronaut has brought the ol' ball 'n' chain to live with him on Mars and fields her complaints about his new hot dog stand in the middle

of the desert, the planet's first fast-food joint, which she doesn't think is a good idea. Score one for the wife. The bickering couple look up in the sky and see their native Earth, the orb whence his customers were supposed to come, blasted to smithereens. Leave it to Ray Bradbury to extract charm from the end of the world.

Piratical space travelers, lusting for land and resources, are put before us in *The Illustrated Man* and *The Martian Chronicles*, and earn our disapproval. Yet with Bradburian inconsistency, and in all innocence, he gives to the big question—why voyage to other parts of the universe?—the politically incorrect answer that we are rapidly using up our world and must take over others if we are to survive. One cannot call this conservative or liberal. Nor is it particularly ennobling. It is seat-of-the-pants practicality, and it signifies the way in which fear drove not only Bradbury's literary imagination but his view of the future.

Arnold J. Toynbee, in his 1934–1961 *Study of History*, argued that a civilization needs challenges to which to respond or it will die. Toynbee's rather hopefully accented “challenge/response” theory caught on in the United States after he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1947. It was sort of the power of positive thinking, in civilizational terms—and Americans, including

Ray Bradbury, embraced the British historian's ideas as an antidote to the pessimistic thought of another famous European historian, Oswald Spengler. From the 1984 Bradbury story “The Toynbee Convector” we can get an idea of how hope and fear fit together in his body of work.

The author sometimes called this his favorite among his creations. It revolves around an inventor-wizard figure who, while not nearly as well drawn as Father Peregrine, at least has the virtue of piquancy. Craig Bennett Stiles, age 130, turns out to be a wizard like L. Frank Baum's Wizard of Oz. That is to say, a highly respected charlatan. The story describes the centenary celebration of the time-traveling that Stiles allegedly did in his old Toynbee Convector—a time machine that made him famous when his own countrymen were in a malaise, bowed down by seemingly insoluble social and economic problems. To lift society out of its “obsession with doom,” young Stiles faked that trip, as he now reveals in an interview with a journalist. Stiles had assured everyone that the future he glimpsed held marvels:

We rebuilt the cities, freshened the small towns, cleaned the lakes and rivers, washed the air, saved the dolphins, increased the whales, stopped the wars, tossed solar stations across space to light the world, colonized the moon, moved on to Mars, then Alpha Centauri.

But these triumphs were in his head, for he had in truth gone nowhere. He was acting on the philosophy of Toynbee, “that fine historian who said any group, any race, any world that did not run to seize the future and shape it was doomed to dust away in the grave.”

Stiles made people believe in his machine even though it was just plausible-looking junk. That is, it is not the hardware that counts, but human will. One must, he tells the journalist, “gently lie and prove the lie true.... What seems a lie is a ramshackle need, wishing to be born.” These prognosticating pep talks are authorial sermons, for, as Bradbury later explained, “The old man who builds the fake time machine and fools everyone into believing that he has seen the future and that we must do something to save ourselves is me.”

The piece missing from “The Toynbee Convector” is religion. Bradbury’s old-fashioned compatibilism made him, at the very least, not your usual liberal promoter of pacifism and endangered species. His writing as a whole makes little sense without understanding this. As the doomed astronaut Jeff Spender said, religious faith should never have been dismissed by modernity as incompatible with science. We need our faith to inspire us, Bradbury believed. We need the hope that the Almighty instills or else our fear will paralyze us.

Entertaining a faith in faith may be pretty conventional stuff, but it connects Bradbury (who was raised vaguely Baptist) to American readers in a unique way. Then, too, consider the leave-me-alone libertarianism that is typical of genre fiction. The *bon mot* of the sci-fi writer Octavia Butler captured it: “I’ve never believed in utopias,” she said, “since my utopia could so easily be someone else’s hell.” Bradbury doesn’t believe in utopia, either; he is seeking for mankind not perfection but a cheerful muddling through. Yet he is no libertarian. He naturally thinks in terms of the group, not the individual—as in the moving final vignette of *The Martian Chronicles*, with the pioneer family from Minnesota that has escaped a moribund Planet Earth and that will seed new human communities on Mars. Again, sheer convention—and yet in Bradbury’s hands it is given a touch of the sublime.

More important than the technology that humans invent is the vision of the inventors; the fact that they dared is what matters most. Bradbury wrote stories that tried to hypnotize us into finding the future oddly, but comfortably, familiar—so that we might go forward to meet it not in fearful uncertainty but with courage, and therefore with success.

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