

Afterword

I DIDN'T KNOW IT, BUT I WAS LITERALLY WRITING A dime novel. In the spring of 1950 it cost me nine dollars and eighty cents in dimes to write and finish the first draft of *The Fire Man* which later became *Fahrenheit 451*.

In all the years from 1941 to that time, I had done most of my typing in the family garages, either in Venice, California (where we lived because we were poor, not because it was the "in" place to be) or behind the tract house where my wife, Marguerite, and I raised our family. I was driven out of my garage by my loving children, who insisted on coming around to the rear window and singing and tapping on the panes. Father had to choose between finishing a story or playing with the girls. I chose to play, of course, which endangered the family income. An office had to be found. We couldn't afford one.

Finally, I located just the place, the typing room in the basement of the library at the University of Cali-

mania at Los Angeles. There, in neat rows, were a score or more of old Remington or Underwood typewriters which rented out at a dime a half hour. You thrust your dime in, the clock ticked madly, and you typed wildly, to finish before the half hour ran out. Thus I was twice driven; by children to leave home, and by a typewriter timing device to be a maniac at the keys. Time was indeed money. I finished the first draft in roughly nine days. At 25,000 words, it was half the novel it eventually would become.

Between investing dimes and going insane when the typewriter jammed (for there went your precious time!) and whipping pages in and out of the device, I wandered upstairs. There I strolled, lost in love, down the corridors, and through the stacks, touching books, pulling volumes out, turning pages, thrusting volumes back, drowning in all the good stuffs that are the essence of libraries. What a place, don't you agree, to write a novel about burning books in the Future!

So much for pasts. What about *Fahrenheit 451* in this day and age. Have I changed my mind about much that it said to me, when I was a younger writer? Only if by change you mean has my love of libraries widened and deepened, to which the answer is a yes that ricochets off the stacks and dusts talcum off the librarian's cheek. Since writing this book, I have spun more stories, novels, essays, and poems about writers than any other writer in history that I can think of. I have written poems about Melville, Melville and Emily Dickinson, Emily Dickinson and Charles Dickens, Hawthorne, Poe, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and along the way I compared Jules Verne and his Mad Captain to Melville and his equally obsessed mariner. I have scribbled poems about librarians, taken night trains with my favorite authors across the continental wilderness, staying up all night

gabbling and drinking, drinking and chatting. I warned Melville, in one poem, to stay away from land (it never was his stuff!) and turned Bernard Shaw into a robot, so as to conveniently stow him aboard a rocket and wake him on the long journey to Alpha Centauri to hear his Prefaces piped off his tongue and into my delighted ear. I have written a Time Machine story in which I hum back to sit at the deathbeds of Wilde, Melville, and Poe to tell of my love and warm their bones in their last hours.... But, enough. As you can see, I am madness maddened when it comes to books, writers, and the great granary silos where their wits are stored.

Recently, with the Studio Theatre Playhouse in Los Angeles at hand, I called all my characters from F. 451 out of the shadows. What's new, I said to Montag, Clarisse, Faber, Beatty, since last we met in 1953?

I asked. *They* answered.

They wrote new scenes, revealed odd parts of their as yet undiscovered souls and dreams. The result was a two-act drama, staged with good results, and in the main, fine reviews.

Beatty came farthest out of the wings in answer to my question: How did it start? Why did you make the decision to become Fire Chief, a burner of books? Beatty's surprising answer came in a scene where he takes our hero Guy Montag home to his apartment. Entering, Montag is stunned to discover the thousands upon thousands of books lining the walls of the Fire Chief's hidden library! Montag turns and cries out to his superior:

"But you're the Chief Burner! You can't have books on your premises!"

To which the Chief, with a dry light smile, replies: "It's not *owning* books that's a crime, Montag, it's

reading them! Yes, that's right. I own books, but don't read them!"

Montag, in shock, awaits Beatty's explanation.

"Don't you see the beauty, Montag? I never read them. Not one book, not one chapter, not one page, not one paragraph. I do play with ironies, don't I? To have thousands of books and never crack one, to turn your back on the lot and say: No. It's like having a house full of beautiful women and, smiling, not touching... one. So, you see, I'm not a criminal at all. If you ever catch me reading one, yes, then turn me in! But this place is as pure as a twelve-year-old virgin girl's cream-white summer night bedroom. These books die on the shelves. Why? Because I say so. I do not give them sustenance, no hope with hand or eye on tongue. They are no better than dust."

Montag protests, "I don't see how you can't be—"

"Tempted?" cries the Fire Chief. "Oh, that was long ago. The apple is eaten and gone. The snake has returned to its tree. The garden has grown to weed and rust."

"Once—" Montag hesitates, then continues, "Once you must have loved books very much."

"Touché!" the Fire Chief responds. "Below the belt. On the chin. Through the heart. Ripping the gut. Oh, look at me, Montag. The man who loved books, no, the boy who was wild for them, insane for them, who climbed the stacks like a chimpanzee gone mad for them."

"I ate them like salad, books were my sandwich for lunch, my tiffin and dinner and midnight munch. I tore out the pages, ate them with salt, doused them with relish, gnawed on the bindings, turned the chapters with my tongue! Books by the dozen, the score and the billion. I carried so many home I was hunchbacked for years. Philosophy, art history, poli-

tics, social science, the poem, the essay, the grandiose play, you name 'em, I ate 'em. And then... and then..." The Fire Chief's voice fades.

Montag prompts: "And then?"

"Why, life happened to me." The Fire Chief shuts his eyes to remember. "Life. The usual. The same. The love that wasn't quite right, the dream that went sour, the sex that fell apart, the deaths that came swiftly to friends not deserving, the murder of someone or another, the insanity of someone close, the slow death of a mother, the abrupt suicide of a father—a stampede of elephants, an onslaught of disease. And nowhere, nowhere the right book for the right time to stuff in the crumbling wall of the breaking dam to hold back the deluge, give or take a metaphor, lose or find a simile. And by the far edge of thirty, and the near rim of thirty-one, I picked myself up, every bone broken, every centimeter of flesh abraded, bruised, or scarred. I looked in the mirror and found an old man lost behind the frightened face of a young man, saw a hatred there for everything and anything, you name it, I'd damn it, and opened the pages of my fine library books and found what, what, what!?"

Montag guesses. "The pages were empty?"

"Bull's eye! Blank! Oh, the words were there, allright, but they ran over my eyes like hot oil, signifying nothing. Offering no help, no solace, no peace, no harbor, no true love, no bed, no light."

Montag thinks back: "Thirty years ago... the final library burnings..."

"On target." Beatty nods. "And having no job, and being a failed Romantic, or whatever in hell, I put in for Fireman First Class. First up the steps, first into the library, first in the burning furnace heart of his

ever-blazing countrymen, douse me with kerosene, hand me my torch!

End of lecture. There you go, Montag. Out the door!"

Montag leaves, with more curiosity than ever about books, well on his way to becoming an outcast, soon to be pursued and almost destroyed by the Mechanical Hound, my robot clone of A. Conan Doyle's great Baskerville beast.

In my play, old man Faber, the teacher-not-quite-in-residence, speaking to Montag through the long night (via the seashell tamp-in ear radio) is victimized by the Fire Chief. How? Beauty suspects Montag is being instructed by such a secret device, knocks it out of his ear, and shouts at the far-removed teacher: "We're coming to get you! We're at the door! We're up the stairs! Gotcha!"

Which so terrifies Faber, his heart destroys him.

All good stuff. Tempting, this late in time. I've had to fight not to stuff it in this new printing of the novel. Finally, many readers have written protesting Clarisse's disappearance, wondering what happened to her. François Truffaut felt the same curiosity, and in his film version of my novel, rescued Clarisse from oblivion and located her with the Book People wandering in the forest, reciting their litany of books to themselves. I felt the same need to save her, for after all she, verging on silly star-struck chatter, was in many ways responsible for Montag's beginning to wonder about books and what was in them. In my play, therefore, Clarisse emerges to welcome Montag, and give a somewhat happier ending to what was, in essence, pretty grim stuff.

The novel, however, remains true to its former self. I don't believe in tampering with any young writer's material, especially when that young writer was once

myself. Montag, Beauty, Mildred, Faber, Clarisse, all stand, move, enter and exit as they did 32 years ago when I first wrote them down, at a dime a half hour, in the basement of the UCLA library. I have changed not one thought or word.

A last discovery. I write all of my novels and stories, as you have seen, in a great surge of delightful passion. Only recently, glancing at the novel, I realized that Montag is named after a paper manufacturing company. And Faber, of course, is a maker of pencils! What a sly thing my subconscious was, to name them thus.

And not tell *me!*

Coda

About two years ago, a letter arrived from a solemn young Vassar lady telling me how much she enjoyed reading my experiment in space mythology, *The Martian Chronicles*.

But, she added, wouldn't it be a good idea, this late in time, to rewrite the book inserting more women's characters and roles?

A few years before that I got a certain amount of mail concerning the same Martian book complaining that the blacks in the book were Uncle Toms and why didn't I "do them over"?

Along about then came a note from a Southern white suggesting that I was prejudiced in favor of the blacks and the entire story should be dropped.

Two weeks ago my mountain of mail delivered forth a pipsqueak mouse of a letter from a well-known publishing house that wanted to reprint my story "The Fog Horn" in a high school reader.

In my story, I had described a lighthouse as having, late at night, an illumination coming from it that was a "God-Light." Looking up at it from the viewpoint of any sea-creature one would have felt that one was in "the Presence."

The editors had deleted "God-Light" and "in the Presence."

Some five years back, the editors of yet another anthology for school readers put together a volume with some 400 (count 'em) short stories in it. How do you cram 400 short stories by Twain, Irving, Poe, Maupassant and Bierce into one book?

Simplicity itself. Skin, debone, demarrow, scarify, melt, render down and destroy. Every adjective that counted, every verb that moved, every metaphor that weighed more than a mosquito—out! Every simile that would have made a sub-moron's mouth twitch—gone! Any aside that explained the two-bit philosophy of a first-rate writer—lost!

Every story, slenderized, starved, bluepenciled, leached and bled white, resembled every other story. Twain read like Poe read like Shakespeare read like Dostoevsky read like—in the finale—Edgar Guest. Every word of more than three syllables had been razored. Every image that demanded so much as one instant's attention—shot dead.

Do you begin to get the damned and incredible picture?

How did I react to all of the above?

By "firing" the whole lot.

By sending rejection slips to each and every one.

By ticketing the assembly of idiots to the far reaches of hell.

The point is obvious. There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches. Every minority, be it

Baptist / Unitarian, Irish / Italian / Octogenarian / Zen Buddhist, Zionist / Seventh-day Adventist, Women's Lib / Republican, Mattachine / Four Square Gospel feels it has the will, the right, the duty to douse the kerosene, light the fuse. Every dimwit editor who sees himself as the source of all dreary blanc-mange plain porridge unleavened literature, licks his guillotine and eyes the neck of any author who dares to speak above a whisper or write above a nursery rhyme.

Fire-Captain Beatty, in my novel *Fahrenheit 451*, described how the books were burned first by minorities, each ripping a page or a paragraph from this book, then that, until the day came when the books were empty and the minds shut and the libraries closed forever.

"Shut the door, they're coming through the window, shut the window, they're coming through the door," are the words to an old song. They fit my lifestyle with newly arriving butcher/censors every month. Only six weeks ago, I discovered that, over the years, some cubby-hole editors at Ballantine Books, fearful of contaminating the young, had, bit by bit, censored some 75 separate sections from the novel. Students, reading the novel which, after all, deals with censorship and book-burning in the future, wrote to tell me of this exquisite irony. Judy Lynn Del Rey, one of the new Ballantine editors, is having the entire book reset and republished this summer with all the damns and hells back in place.

A final test for old Job II here: I sent a play, *Leviathan 99*, off to a university theater a month ago. My play is based on the "Moby Dick" mythology, dedicated to Melville, and concerns a rocket crew and a blind space captain who venture forth to encounter a Great White Comet and destroy the destroyer. My drama premieres as an opera in Paris this autumn.

But, for now, the university wrote back that they hardly dared do my play—it had no women in it! And the ERA ladies on campus would descend with ball-bats if the drama department even tried!

Grinding my bicuspid into powder, I suggested that would mean, from now on, no more productions of *Boys in the Band* (no women), or *The Women* (no men). Or, counting heads, male and female, a good lot of Shakespeare that would never be seen again, especially if you count lines and find that all the good stuff went to the males!

I wrote back maybe they should do my play one week, and *The Women* the next. They probably thought I was joking, and I'm not sure that I wasn't.

For it is a mad world and it will get madder if we allow the minorities, be they dwarf or giant, orangutan or dolphin, nuclear-head or water-conversation-alist, pro-computerologist or Neo-Luddite, simpleton or sage, to interfere with aesthetics. The real world is the playing ground for each and every group, to make or unmake laws. But the tip of the nose of my book or stories or poems is where their rights end and my territorial imperatives begin, run and rule. If Mormons do not like my plays, let them write their own. If the Irish hate my Dublin stories, let them rent typewriters. If teachers and grammar school editors find my jawbreaker sentences shatter their mushmilk teeth, let them eat stale cake dunked in weak tea of their own ungodly manufacture. If the Chicano intellectuals wish to re-cut my "Wonderful Ice Cream Suit" so it shapes "Zoot," may the belt unravel and the pants fall.

For, let's face it, digression is the soul of wit. Take philosophic asides away from Dante, Milton or Hamlet's father's ghost and what stays is dry bones. Laurence Sterne said it once: Digressions, incontestably,

are the sunshine, the life, the soul of reading! Take them out and one cold eternal winter would reign in every page. Restore them to the writer—he steps forth like a bridegroom, bids them all-hail, brings in variety and forbids the appetite to fail.

In sum, 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, deguttled, to become a non-book.

All you umpires, back to the bleachers. Referees, hit the showers. It's my game. I pitch, I hit, I catch. I run the bases. At sunset I've won or lost. At sunrise, I'm out again, giving it the old try.

And no one can help me. Not even you.