

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

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(Author's note: This article was originally published in September 2010, but it serves as a fitting review of the career of Ray Bradbury, who died on June 5, 2012.)

"But of course he was going away, there was nothing else to do, the time was up, the clock had run out, and he was going very far away indeed."



Unless one believes that Mr. Electrico's command to Ray Bradbury should be taken literally, the famed author will likely not be on this planet to celebrate his 100th birthday.

For those unfamiliar with the Bradbury mythology, Mr. Electrico was a carnival magician Bradbury saw in 1932, when he was 12. Sam Weller describes the event in his 2005 biography *The Bradbury Chronicles*

: "Mr. Electrico then approached the bespectacled, wide-eyed boy in the front row. Taking the [electrified] sword, he tapped Ray on each shoulder, then on the brow, and finally on the tip of his nose and cried, 'Live forever!'"

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"Why did he say that?" Bradbury said to Weller. "I decided that was the greatest idea I had ever heard. Just weeks after Mr. Electrico said this to me, I started writing every day. I never stopped."

Immortality, of course, already belongs to Bradbury. His 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451* stands alongside Aldous Huxley's

Brave New World

(published in 1932) and George Orwell's

Nineteen Eighty-Four

(published in 1949) as a mid-20th Century cautionary-tale classic imagining a future full of numbing technology and invasive government.

[\(See the sidebar "Pleasure to Burn -- Reading](#)

[Fahrenheit 451](#)

[."\)](#)

The book is the subject of the Moline Public Library's Quad Cities-wide "Big Read" campaign, which begins September 27 with a keynote lecture by Weller and closes on October 31 -- Bradbury's favorite holiday. [\(For a list of Big Read events, see the sidebar " Fahrenheit 451 -- Area Book Discussions, Panel Discussions, and Film Screenings."\)](#)

But while

Fahrenheit 451

is undoubtedly Bradbury's lasting long-form work, Weller noted in an interview last week that the book isn't typical of the author.

"It's not characteristic," Weller said. Bradbury wrote short stories with a similar warning tone -- most famously "The Veldt," the chilling tale of an immersive virtual-reality playroom that's a bit too authentic -- "but I don't think it's indicative of the entirety of everything he's created." *Fahrenheit 451*

is "more singular," he said.

{mp3}weller-bradbury{/mp3}**Interview with Sam Weller (1 hour, 50 minutes).**

[Download mp3.](#)

And while Bradbury is venerated for his use of the fantastic, Weller argues that the author must also be remembered for the works set in his childhood home of Waukegan, Illinois -- the Green Town of *Dandelion Wine* and the dark-carnival novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. "He

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Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

is intrinsic to the literary fabric of the heartland," Weller said. "He's one of our great Midwest writers. He tells a small-town story like almost no other writer can do."

Bradbury turned 90 on August 22, and while this might look like a premature obituary, it isn't intended as one; the nine-decade milestone is a great opportunity to celebrate Bradbury while he can still enjoy it. (As Weller will tell you, Bradbury loves the limelight.) And his legacy is much greater than *Fahrenheit 451*.

The Illustrated Man

"The pictures were moving, each in its turn, each for a brief minute or two. There in the moonlight, with the tiny tinkling thoughts and the distant sea voices, each little drama was enacted. Whether it took an hour or three hours for the dramas to finish, it would be hard to say. I only know that I lay fascinated and did not move while the stars wheeled in the sky."

To venerate Ray Bradbury for *Fahrenheit 451* is akin to reducing the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia to his paintings; it gives too much weight to a secondary pursuit and ignores the primary contribution.

Fahrenheit 451 is a novel by a writer whose attention span didn't allow for many of them. It's science fiction by a guy who insists (correctly) that his primary genre is fantasy. The serious, dark tone is in opposition to the infectious enthusiasm of much of his work. ("The Veldt," despite its earnest and genuine technological concerns, operates first as a wicked tale, and one can almost see the smile on its author's face as the parents are devoured in a manufactured African landscape.)

Furthermore, Bradbury's extra-print activities help illuminate that his fears about audio-visual entertainment as anesthesia haven't precluded him from participating in them. Television (writing for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and his own *The Ray Bradbury Theater*, assisting Rod Serling with his conception of

The Twilight Zone

), movies (writing the screenplay for John Huston's adaptation of

Moby-Dick

), and the stage (his own Pandemonium Theatre Company) represent a significant portion of his output, and he even helped design and write the Spaceship Earth attraction for Walt Disney World's Epcot.

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Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35



But the simplest way to discount the importance of *Fahrenheit 451* to Bradbury's oeuvre is to spend some time with his short stories. Most of us were introduced to Bradbury in grade or middle school with "The Veldt" or "All Summer in a Day" (the one about the girl locked in the closet), and from there many of us devoured him. And while some of his books can be read as cohesive wholes -- most notably

The Martian Chronicles

and

Dandelion Wine

-- they are fundamentally story collections.

Weller recommends a handful of Bradbury stories when he speaks at high schools, and while he mixes them up sometimes, he offered five starting points in our interview: "The Veldt," "All Summer in a Day," "The Lake," "The Sound of Summer Running," and "The Foghorn." At ListentoTheEchoes.com

-- the Web site for his new book of Bradbury interviews -- Weller is listing his 25 favorite Bradbury stories, beginning with "The Veldt."

Yet to *truly* appreciate Bradbury's breadth and depth as a writer, you need more immersion, and there are two excellent anthologies: *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*, originally published in 1980, collects 100 of his best stories, and 2003's

Bradbury Stories

adds another hundred -- with no duplication.

One can also get a sense of Bradbury's legacy through his influence. Weller fills *The Bradbury Chronicles* with epigraphs suggesting that contemporary popular culture would look a lot different without Ray Bradbury -- the author's own butterfly effect (a concept he explored in his 1952 story "A Sound of Thunder"). From Kiss' Ace Frehley to Apple's Steve Wozniak to authors Neil Gaiman and Ursula K. Le Guin, Bradbury's impact has been wide and profound.

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

Gaiman, in [an essay published earlier this year](#), was particularly eloquent: "I can imagine all sorts of worlds and places, but I cannot imagine one without Ray Bradbury. Not Bradbury the man ... but Bradbury the builder of dreams. The man who took an idea of the American Midwest and made it magical and tangible, who took his own childhood and all the people and things in it and used it to shape the world. The man who gave us a future to fear, one without stories, without books. The man who invented Halloween in its modern incarnation."

And while Bradbury is still known (to his chagrin) as a science-fiction writer, recognition as a "serious" author has been building over the past decade. He received a Pulitzer Prize special citation (in 2007) "for his distinguished, prolific, and deeply influential career as an unmatched author of science fiction and fantasy," the National Medal of Arts (in 2004), and the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation (in 2000).

There's a good reason that respect has been slow to come. By his own admission, Bradbury is a writer for children. As Weller said, Bradbury -- like Edgar Allan Poe -- appeals to younger readers because of story conceits that are "fantastic and memorable and mythological."

Bradbury's great gift to the world is that he hooks young people with his fantasy, horror, science fiction, and nostalgia, often turning them into readers and thinkers and dreamers. In that way, he might be the best weapon against the world he portrays in *Fahrenheit 451*.

Weller acknowledged that most people who are Bradbury fans as teens eventually outgrow him. But he said that there is often a second period of revelation. "When you do go back and revisit him as an adult reader, you discover an entire new landscape," he said. "You discover all those literary things ... that you may not have been aware of when you were 11. ...

"What makes Ray Bradbury very singular is that around when he was in his early 20s, he really stopped reading the writing of his peers. He stopped reading pulp fiction and science fiction and fantasy, and he started reading Steinbeck, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, heavily immersed himself in Ernest Hemingway, Nathaniel Hawthorne. And he started really studying literary writers. Deeply. But he kept his love of genre. That's what's made him such a great writer. No doubt he's a genre writer, but he brings all the conventions of what he studied in literature over to genre."

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

Adult readers, for example, might notice Bradbury's use of point of view. *The Stories of Ray Bradbury* begins with "The Night," an audacious choice because it addresses the reader as "you." And "There Will Come Soft Rains" is a story whose only character is a house.

"The guy was very experimental and cutting-edge on a literary level," Weller said. As an adult, "you not only reconnect with your inner child as a reader, but you discover a whole new horizon of literary technique in his work."

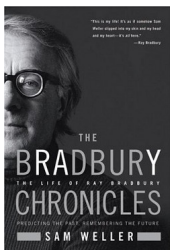
That will, hopefully, be one of the legacies of the Big Read: old fans coming back to discover that Bradbury is more than a writer for kids.

That's also been the impact of Weller's biography. He said that many people have come to him and said, "Thank you for making me want to go back and read Ray Bradbury."

He added: "I feel like I did my job. I've made people interested in him again."

The Leave-Taking

"Now, chalk in hand, she stood back from life a silent hour before reaching for the eraser."



Weller's relationship with Bradbury began in 2000, when he successfully pitched the idea of a profile to the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* to mark the author's 80th birthday. At the end of their initial interview, Bradbury said he wanted to stay in touch. Weller recalled: "'Come back and visit me soon.' And he was very insistent upon that."

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

So Weller returned two months later, after the article had been published. Bradbury suggested that he write more magazine stories about him. "We sort of struck up this really tender father-son relationship," Weller said.

And he realized that "there was no reference book of his life," so he proposed to Bradbury a larger project. The author declined, saying, "I think a biography means your life's over. It's the life story. ... I'm 80. ... If you call me in 30 or 35 years, maybe we can get working on this."

Weller said he wasn't deterred: "It wasn't an adamant 'no.' He was humorous about it. I stayed after him very gently." Bradbury agreed a few months later.

Much of *The Bradbury Chronicles* will be familiar because the author so thoroughly mined his life for his fiction, from his childhood in *Dandelion Wine* to his Houston experience in *Green Shadows, White Whale*

"The autobiography is all there," Weller said, "not only in the various forewords and introductions to his books, but also sewn ... intrinsically into his fiction. ... While he's a fantasy writer, his life is deeply embedded into his fantastic fiction" -- even *The Martian Chronicles*.

But Weller's work is still an invaluable complement to Bradbury's works. Exhaustive yet readable, Weller is especially good at documenting the life reflected in the fiction -- such as how an extramarital affair made its way into a story. (While Bradbury was generous with his time and archives, he didn't exercise any control over the biography.)

And although he doesn't emphasize them, Weller doesn't shy away from incidents that deflate the Bradbury persona, including marital difficulties. "As a child who read Ray Bradbury, I wanted to be sensitive to the readers," Weller said. "I didn't want to spoil an image they may have had about this almost grandfatherly figure who has led a very, very positive life, and has been an inspiration to so many." Still, he said, "Ray Bradbury is very human and is as flawed as anybody else."

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

"But when the book came out, I didn't alienate his daughters or his grandchildren or even Ray Bradbury for that matter. ... I was able to tell a lot of those stories without hurting anybody." (Bradbury's wife, Marguerite, died in November 2003, but Weller and Bradbury discussed his infidelities with her present.)

Weller has also been thorough, not afraid to point out when Bradbury's incredible recall isn't quite correct. For example, Bradbury places his uncle's funeral in the same Labor Day weekend as his meeting with Mr. Electrico -- giving the stories a combined resonance, contrasting mortality and immortality. Yet the uncle was murdered in October.

Weller said he often had to grapple with the accuracy of what Bradbury was telling him: "Is the stuff this man is telling me true? Or is the product of a couple things? False memory, which we all have. How on Earth do you remember going to a carnival 75 years ago with complete accuracy? ... Secondly, this is one of the great American imaginations of the 20th Century. When does imagination come into the telling of the tales, and as such, when does it become self-mythology? ...

"After 10 years of deep immersion in this man's life -- constantly visiting him, constantly going through files, constantly trying to verify his stories through other sources -- I've come to the conclusion that far more often than not, this is not mythology. This is the truth. If there are inaccuracies coming into play, it's just that he remembered it wrong."

He even thinks that Bradbury did, as he claims, recall details of his birth. "I believe the guy on that one," Weller said. Like Einstein, he said, Bradbury "uses a fraction more of that brain capacity than most of us do. ... His brain is an encyclopedia."

Weller now teaches a Bradbury course at Columbia College Chicago, where he's on the fiction-writing faculty. His book *Listen to the Echoes: The Ray Bradbury Interviews* was published earlier this year and is a great companion piece to the biography.

And the two men have maintained their friendship. Weller said he visits Bradbury monthly in Los Angeles and talks to him weekly.

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Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

I asked Weller whether he's certain Bradbury will die, given the Mr. Electrico story. "It sounds like a crazy question, and hokey, but it's not," he said. "No, I'm not, actually. There's something so mystical about him."

But he said that Bradbury is undoubtedly slowing down. He suffered strokes in 1999 and 2000, and one's health rarely improves when one lives as long as the author has. "I see that as he ages and becomes less healthy, the fire is diminishing just a little bit ... ," Weller said. "The light isn't as bright, but the light is still there. ... I do think the guy could really surprise us and stick it out for a lot longer because of this innate, intense will to live."

Bradbury himself, Weller said, gave hints of acknowledging his mortality at his 90th-birthday celebration in late August: "Someone said over the weekend at his birthday party, 'Here's to 10 more great years.' And he said, 'We'll see.' And the old Ray Bradbury would have said, 'You're goddamn right.'"

And the author took Weller aside with an instruction. "I may be getting ready to sell the rights to *Martian Chronicles* again for a film," the biographer recalled his subject saying. "That will get me some good money. And I want you to look into my grandparents' home in Waukegan, Illinois, to see if it's possible to buy it."

For Weller, who considers the author a second father after working with him for the past decade, it's a prospect that clearly fills him with sadness: Ray Bradbury appears to be preparing for his final Green Town homecoming.

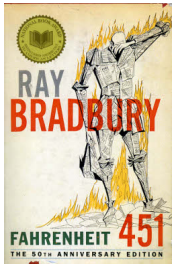
Sam Weller will speak at the Moline Public Library's Big Read kick-off program on Monday, September 27, at 7 p.m.

[\(Return to the main article.\)](#)

Sidebar: Pleasure to Burn -- Reading *Fahrenheit 451*

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35



[\(Return to the main article.\)](#)

Sidebar: *Fahrenheit 451* -- Area Book Discussions, Panel Discussions, and Film Screenings

Monday, September 27: *Fahrenheit 451* Kick-Off and Keynote Program. With Sam Weller, author of *The Bradbury Chronicles: The Life of Ray Bradbury* and *Listen to the Echoes: The Ray Bradbury Interviews*. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Tuesday, September 28: *Ray Bradbury -- An American Icon.* Documentary screening. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Wednesday, September 29: *Fahrenheit 451* -- Intellectual Freedom Panel Discussion. Moderated by Western Illinois University's Everett Hamner. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 6:30 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Wednesday, September 29: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. East Moline Public Library (740 16th Avenue, East Moline). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)755-9614.

Wednesday, September 29: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. Davenport Public Library, Eastern Avenue Branch (6000 Eastern Avenue, Davenport). 7 p.m. For information, call (563)888-3371.

Wednesday, September 29: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. With a panel discussion on First Amendment rights. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

Wednesday, September 29: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. Black Hawk College -- Quad Cities Campus (6600 34th Avenue, Moline). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)796-5147.

Thursday, September 30: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. Rock Island Public Library, Main Branch. (401 19th Street, Rock Island). 5:30 p.m. For information, call (309)732-7323.

Monday, October 4: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. Western Illinois University, Quad Cities Campus (3561 60th Street, Moline). 6 p.m. For information, call (309)762-9481.

Thursday, October 7: *Fahrenheit 451 -- The Graphic Novel* Book Discussion. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Tuesday, October 12: *Fahrenheit 451 -- Large-Type* Book Discussion. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 2 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Tuesday, October 12: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. Bettendorf Public Library (2950 Learning Campus Drive, Bettendorf). 7 p.m. For information, call (563)344-4179.

Thursday, October 14: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. Jewish Federation of the Quad Cities (1705 Second Avenue, Rock Island). 10 a.m. For information, call (309)793-1300.

Thursday, October 14: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. St. Ambrose University Library (518 West Locust Street, Davenport). 7 p.m. For information, call (563)333-6246.

Friday, October 15: *Fahrenheit 451* Brown Bag Lunch Book Discussion. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). Noon. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 01 September 2010 05:35

Monday, October 25: *Fahrenheit 451* -- Spanish-Language Edition Book Discussion. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Tuesday, October 26: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. Silvis Public Library (105 Eighth Street, Silvis). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)755-3393.

Tuesday, October 26: *Fahrenheit 451* Book Discussion. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 7 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

Wednesday, October 27: *Fahrenheit 451* Film Screening. With a discussion by Black Hawk College's Erskine Carter and Western Illinois University's Everett Hamner. Moline Public Library (3210 41st Street, Moline). 6:30 p.m. For information, call (309)524-2470.

[\(Return to the main article.\)](#)