

An Interview with Ray Bradbury

Northridge Review: You have been outspoken in your advice to aspiring writers. What would you say in this respect to readers of the *Northridge Review*?

Bradbury: It all depends on what you want from life. Do you want a car and a rich apartment and nice clothes? You can't have them. Not now, anyway. I took a vow of poverty to become a writer. Which means I sold newspapers on a street corner for three years, from the age of 19 to the age of about 22, lived at home with my folks, had no car, few clothes, and made about ten bucks a week all those years. Gradually, I began to sell stories to pulp magazines for twenty dollars apiece, and then finally forty dollars apiece. All the material you find in my books, like *The Martian Chronicles* or *The Illustrated Man*, was sold to pulp magazines for from twenty to eighty dollars a story!

Is that pain to you? Is that hard? It wasn't for me. I knew where I wanted to go. Do you? It wasn't hard for me to give things up, for I never wanted a car in the first place. I had had too many friends killed by cars. When I was 27 I was still living at home with my folks, to save money, so I could write. Would that be pain for you? Not for me.

I got married when I was 27 and moved into a thirty-dollar-a-month apartment in Venice, California with my wife who worked and made about forty dollars a week, while I made around 38 dollars a week, selling my stories. We ate hot dogs and went to the Penny Arcade nights to have fun. We went to cheap movies. And we were in love. And then my wife started having babies, which scared the hell out of me, for our income was cut in half. But God was watching and said, Ray old bean, you're a good chap. I'm going to raise your pay to eighty dollars a week. And that's what happened. So my pay kept going up, to \$100 a week by the time I was 32 and \$130 a week when I was 33. After that, I began to get

screen work on occasion and my income jumped. But you can see I got what I wanted gradually. And I got it out of love, doing what I wanted to do.

I guess I can only suggest that you find something that you love madly, and do it. And whether it is being a writer, actor, painter, or computerologist, as long as you love it, do it, do it, do it. Nothing to stop you except fear, and in the doing the fear vanishes. To sum it up, if you want to write, if you want to create, you must be the most sublime fool that God ever turned out and sent rambling. You must write every single day of your life.

I've always been deeply in love with writing. It's never been any work or any problem. To those of you who don't care enough about writing to write, I just say, cut it out and go away and do something else. You've got to find something you love that drives you to do it. Otherwise, it's not worth doing. If you have to force yourself all the time to do it, you'd better find another career.

N.R.: What is the relationship between reading other writers' material and one's own writing process?

Bradbury: The more you read, the more ideas explode in your head, run riot, beautifully collide so that when you go to bed the visions color the ceiling and light the walls with wonderful discoveries. I fell in love with books when I was five or six, and I still use libraries and bookstores, years later. The meat of writing must be found and fed on in every library you can jump into and every bookstore you can pole-vault through.

N.R.: What are your own reading preferences?

Bradbury: I may start a night's read with a James Bond novel, move on to Shakespeare, dip into Dylan Thomas, make a fast turnabout to Fu Manchu, that great and evil Oriental doctor, ancestor of Dr. No, then pick up Emily Dickinson, and end my evening with Ross Macdonald, the detective novelist, or Robert Frost.

N.R.: How would you assess yourself as a writer?

Bradbury: When I was a boy, I collected Buck Rogers comic strips. People made fun, so I tore them up. Later, I said to myself, "What's this all about? These people are trying to starve me. The greatest food in my life, right now, is Buck Rogers!" And I started collecting comic strips again. For I had the great secret!

If I had listened to the taste-mongers and critics, I would have played a safe game, never jumped the fence, and become a nonentity. The fact is plain: I am an amiable compost heap. My mind is full of moron plus brilliant trash. I learned early that in order to grow myself excellent I had to start myself in plain old farmyard manure. From such heaps of mediocre or angelic words I fever myself up to grow fine stories, or roses, if you prefer.

I am a junkyard, then, of all the libraries and bookshops I ever fell into or leaned upon, and am proud and happy that I never developed such a rare taste that I could not go back and jog with Tarzan or hit the Yellow Brick Road with Dorothy, both characters and their books banned for 50 years by librarians and educators.

I have had my own loves, and gone my own way to become my own self.

N.R.: Are many of your ideas taken from real-life?

Bradbury: All the ideas you find in my books are based upon a little piece of something I saw in our society. For instance, 32 years ago, Senator Joseph McCarthy was beginning to make lists of certain books. I didn't like that. I don't like it when anyone or any group tells me, "Here's a reading list, go read these books— and only these books."

So I wrote *Fahrenheit 451*. I want us all to move very freely through our society and pick up all the information we need to make wise decisions.

N.R.: Which of your books are you most fond of?

Bradbury: *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is my favorite book, for me my most delicious book, because I wrote it with one purpose. I wanted you to read it late at night with a flashlight under the covers. If a book isn't that good, it's not worth reading.

N.R.: What is it that you hope your writing career has achieved?

Bradbury: I stared at all the books in my library once and said, "My God, if I could once in my life write *one* book that would wind up on the shelf there," leaning against Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, or . . . you name one of your own favorite books out of the past. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, to mention one of my favorites, the *Oz* books, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Robinson Crusoe*, all the books of Jules Verne. Beautiful books. I've been reading them the last five or ten years and they're better today for me than they were when I was twelve years old.

If I could only create one book that would finally, at the end of my life, live on that shelf with those lovely people. They're the people who are going to live. Most of the stuff that's read today will fade away, and *Alice in Wonderland* will go on for centuries. I want to be with these heroes of mine, Twain and Dickens and Stevenson.

N.R.: What are your views of the course that science-fiction and fantasy writing has taken since you published your first book, *Dark Carnival*, in 1947?

Bradbury: If you went into an average library in 1932, 1945, or 1953, you would have found no Edgar Rice Burroughs, no L. Frank Baum and no *Oz*. In 1958 or 1962 you would have found no Asimov, no Heinlein, no Van Vogt, no Bradbury! Here and there, perhaps one book or two by the above. For the rest, a desert. What were the reasons for this?

Among librarians and teachers there was then, and there still somewhat dimly persists, an idea that only fact matters. Fantasy even when it takes science-fictional forms, which it often does, is dangerous. It is escapist. It is day-dreaming. It has nothing to do with the world and the world's problems. So said the snobs who did not know themselves as snobs.

However, the children, hungry for ideas and dying of starvation, sensed, if they could not say, that fantasy, and its robot child science fiction, is not escape at all, but a circling of reality to enchant it and make it behave. The children guessed, if they did not whisper it, that all science fiction is an attempt to solve problems by pretending to look the other way. So the children cried, "Enough! Let there be fantasy. Let there be science-fiction light."

Everywhere we look are problems. And everywhere we further deeply look are solutions. The children of men, the children of time, how can they not be fascinated with these challenges? Science fiction becomes scientific fact. Thus, science fiction and its recent history.

So it seems we are all science-fictional children dreaming ourselves into new ways of survival. Instead of putting saints' bones by in crystal jars, to be touched by the faithful in following centuries, we put by voices and faces, dreams and impossible dreams on tape, on records, in books, on TV, in films.

By osmosis, the Industrial Revolution and the Electronic and Space Age have finally seeped into the blood, bone, marrow, heart, flesh and mind of the young who as teachers teach us what we should have known all along.

N.R.: Then you believe that science fiction actually applies more to the present than to the future?

Bradbury: This literary process can be described as Perseus confronted by Medusa. Gazing at Medusa's image in his bronze shield, pretending to look one way, Perseus reaches back over his shoulder and severs Medusa's head. So science fiction pretends at futures in order to cure sick dogs lying in today's road.

N.R.: What is your opinion of current American fiction in general?

Bradbury: Whenever new, modern, American novels come out, I go read *Rumpelstiltskin* again, because I think the modern American novel is bankrupt of imagination, wit, style, idea on any level. I am a language person. I've loved poetry all my life and my favorite people, whom I visit at the library again and again, are William Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw, and G.K. Chesterton and Loren Eiseley. People with ideas. People with images. People with language. People who romance me with death, and excitement, and make me want to go on living.

N.R.: What is the role of fantasy in every-day life?

Bradbury: I happen to believe in fantasy. I happen to believe we survive by our wits, by our ability to fantasize, and without it we couldn't exist in the very real world. The ability to fantasize helps us make our futures. I don't care what you dream; it's honorable if you love it.