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Fahrenheit 451

by

Ray Bradbury
1953



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel takes place in an unnamed futuristic city sometime in the 24th century. The atmosphere is fantastic, for technology has transformed society into a land of virtual reality and ultra-futurism. Television is totally interactive. Giant crematoriums collect and dispose of bodies in a monstrous, helicopter-borne contraption known as the Big Flue. Doors are programmed to announce visitors before they even arrive. Books are illegal, as is any true exercise of thought. Mankind has become lazy and stupid because of.....

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Guy Montag - a fireman in the 24th century who burns books and the homes of the people that own them. He begins to question his life when he meets an extraordinary and fresh young girl. His new sense of purpose propels him headlong into life-threatening danger.

Mildred "Millie" Montag - Montag's wife. She lives a vacuous life filled with television and radio. She has no ideas of her own and is frightened by the very notion of non-conformity. She ultimately betrays her husband to the authorities rather than face the meaninglessness of her own life.

Clarisse McClellan - Montag's seventeen-year old neighbor. She is a fresh young girl whose nonconformist attitudes make her an outcast. She likes to pick flowers and watch birds and her fresh old-fashioned values are cause enough for her to see a psychiatrist. She is the catalyst for Montag's change, causing him to question his own happiness. A hit-and-run driver kills her.

Captain Beatty - the chief fireman at the station. He has read many books and memorized most of them. He appears to be a hard-core believer in the new system and ultimately forces Montag to burn down his own house. Montag kills Beatty in this confrontation.

Professor Faber - an old English professor whose help Montag enlists when.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist in the novel is Guy Montag, a 24th century fireman who starts fires rather than puts them out. His responsibility to the city is to burn houses that contain books, since books are illegal. Montag begins to question his acceptance of the status quo and learns to be a non-conformist. Various.....

Antagonist - The antagonist for Montag and for most of the people in the novel is their society, which is futuristic and dictatorial; thinking for oneself is censored and life has no meaning. It has been mandated that all men should be equally intelligent and informed; therefore, possessing books and seeking meaningful knowledge are criminal acts. Television and sleeping pills are the opiate escapes of nearly.....

Climax - The novel climaxes when Montag and the other firemen are called to burn a home they discover is Montag's. Millie, Montag's wife, has betrayed her husband and turned him in as a.....

Outcome - Although the story is a tragedy, it ends with a small ray of hope. Although Montag is driven from society, he manages to escape to the country, where he meets other self-exiled intellectual leaders. All of these men dedicate themselves to the goal of reintroducing books into.....

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

From all outward appearances, Guy Montag is content in his job as a fireman in the 24th century town in which he lives. He has learned to accept that his society is dictatorial, expressly forbidding its citizens from reading or possessing books or seeking any other intellectual self-improvement. Montag has even learned to take pleasure in the flames that shoot from his igniter when he is called to burn the dwelling of the citizens that possess books or commit other crimes against the society. He is successful in distancing himself from the fact that his purpose in life is to destroy other peoples' property.

The novel opens on a typical day for Montag, the protagonist of the novel; he finishes work and heads toward home. On the way, he runs into his teenage neighbor, Clarisse McClellan, who lives in the house next door to him. In the futuristic world in which she lives, Clarisse is judged to be peculiar, for she is strangely old-fashioned. She is interested in the way flowers smell and how the grass feels under her feet. She is seeing a psychiatrist because of her non-conformist interests. As she talks to Montag, Clarisse challenges him by asking, "Are you happy?" This simple question is Montag's catalyst for change and causes everything that follows in the novel.

Without eagerness, Montag goes home to Millie, his wife. There is never any affection between them; in fact, they seldom even notice one another. On this particular night, as bombers fly overhead to foreshadow impending war, Montag discovers Millie has taken an overdose, which is a common occurrence in the town. He calmly calls the suicide orderlies, who are always standing by to come to the rescue of those who attempt to kill themselves. With little effort, they save Millie's life. The distance between Millie and Montag deepens the next day when he tries to talk to her about her actions. She claims not to remember what she has done and returns to her interactive television, totally ignoring him.

Over the next several weeks, Clarisse and Montag develop a friendly relationship. They talk about ideas and thoughts in a way that no one in this society seems to do anymore. Because of.....

THEMES

There are several important and related themes that are developed throughout the novel. By describing the damage caused by a lack of books or knowledge and by an over dependence on technology, Bradbury's purpose seems to be an attack on such conditions before they occur, hopefully to prevent them.

Major Theme - The major theme of the book is Bradbury's attack on censorship. In the futuristic society he portrays, the government has banned the reading or owning of all books and the accumulation of any knowledge. As a result, the citizens have become non-threatening, non-interesting humans

Minor Themes - Closely related to the theme of banning books is the theme of conformity. The government has disallowed the accumulation of any knowledge, from books or other sources, for it does not want any one person to be smarter than the other. If everyone is exactly alike, stripped of.....

MOOD

The tone of *Fahrenheit 451* is eerily futuristic and gloomy. The world, as it is portrayed in the novel, is a dictatorial police state, filled with strange technological modernizations that have deprived mankind of a purpose. Accumulation of knowledge and the possession of books are illegal. Mechanical Hounds are programmed to hunt down and kill "criminals", whose bodies are then.....

AUTHOR INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Ray Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois, on August 22, 1920. The third son of Leonard Spaulding

Bradbury and Esthere Marie Moberg Bradbury, Ray showed promise as a writer at the early age of eleven when he began writing short stories on butcher paper. As a child, he was fascinated by magic and fantasy and spent many an afternoon dreaming that he would grow up to be a magician himself. In his youth, his family moved from Illinois to Arizona, and then on to Los Angeles, where he spent most of his earlier years.

Bradbury's first story, "Holler Bochen's Dilemma," was printed in 1938 in an.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

(Note: The novel is divided into three parts. There are no chapters within the parts. For the purpose of commentary, the parts will be divided into sections based on the major actions or events that occur. These sections are not noted in the novel, nor are they intended to suggest the novel should have been arranged so. Instead, the author of this guide has given suggested section headings within each part to facilitate better understanding of the major events taking place in that section. The section headings are given in Italics.)

PART 1: "THE HEARTH AND THE SALAMANDER"

Montag meets his neighbor Clarisse

Summary

The main character, Montag, is a fireman in the 24th century. His job is not to put out fires, but to start them in the homes of people who have defied the laws by owning and reading books. At the start of the novel, Montag finds it extremely pleasurable to watch the fires spouting forth from the nozzle of his hose and see the house in front of him being razed by flames. He feels proud to be doing the work of his dictatorial state.

After fighting the fire, Montag returns to the station, hangs up his helmet and walks out into the night towards his home. On the way, he feels strange, as if someone is "faintly breathing near him." He turns the corner and runs into his new neighbor, Clarisse McClellan. She is a lovely young girl and Montag is enthralled by her presence. She walks the rest of the way with him and questions him about his job. She whimsically reminds him that firemen of old used to put out fires rather than start them. Her strange and unfamiliar way of talking about the laws makes Montag uneasy. He feels she is too free-spirited, questioning the society as it exists. In contrast to Clarisse's easy pleasantness, Montag is jaded and accepting of the status quo of things.

When they reach Clarisse's house, which is next door to Montag's, he bids her a warm good-bye. Clarisse runs toward her door, but comes back after a moment. She asks Montag, "Are you happy?" Without waiting for his answer, she disappears into her house.

Notes

From the opening of the novel, the setting and tone are established as eerily futuristic. Firemen no longer are needed to put out fires, for all the homes are sheeted with inflammable materials; as a result, there is never an opportunity to put out the fire in a burning building, to rescue possessions, or to save lives. Instead, the job of firemen is now to set fire to the homes of "criminals" who have dared to defy the government and possess books. Montag, the protagonist of the novel, is a fireman. At the beginning of the book, he relishes his job of destruction, grinning wildly as flames consume the home of a criminal. He feels honored to be part of a team of men who insure that there are no books in existence. The government does not allow them, for it does not want individuals to think on their own or become wiser than the next citizen. Bradbury's main theme in the novel becomes immediately apparent. The entire story will be about the destructive force of censorship, even though the practice is never called by its name.

Montag is one of multitude of firemen who are responsible for property destruction; in the book, he becomes a sort of everyman who unthinkingly does his duty and has even learned to find macabre pleasure in his powers

of destruction. He has worked at his same job for ten years, never questioning the evil of what he does. Significantly, his helmet is number 451; this number assumes symbolic importance in the novel since it is also the temperature at which most paper burns.

Montag's life is changed by his new next-door neighbor, a seventeen-year old girl named Clarisse McClellan. One night on the way home from work, he chances to run into her and they walk on together. He is amazed at her free spirit and her questioning of governmental authority. Clarisse has no qualms about expressing her opinions, even when they are radical and revolutionary. She talks about the feel of the green grass underfoot and the smell of the pink flowers, things that Montag has never noticed. It is obvious to him that she is a free thinker and an individual. From their first encounter, she fully challenges Montag. She asks him the simple question, "Are you happy?" These three words set off a volley of doubts and queries in Montag's mind.

In the past, Montag has always been content with his job and his life; but Clarisse's question makes him realize that he has never been happy like she seems to be. As a result, this young teenager becomes the catalyst for Montag's self-realization. From this point forward in the novel, he will question his purpose and involvement in life.

Montag's wife overdoses on sleeping pills

Summary

Montag enters his house with Clarisse's question hanging in the air about him; he simply cannot get it off his mind or stop thinking about the answer. He realizes with a sense of growing defeat that he indeed is not happy. To add to his misery, he hears the warplanes overhead and thinks about the political situation; war seems inevitable and imminent.

Before entering the bedroom, Montag imagines Mildred, his wife, lying on the bed like a cold statue with thimble-sized radios clamped on her ears. Every night, she listens to music and falls into a deep sleep. Once inside the room, he sees that Mildred is already asleep with the aid of her sleeping pills and her music. Montag thinks about how distant he and she are from one another. As he turns toward his own bed, he nearly trips on an object in the floor. Using his igniter, he sees that it is an empty crystal bottle that had earlier held sleeping tablets. It is obvious that Millie has overdosed. Montag feels for the telephone and calls the emergency hospital. At once, orderlies come to his house with stomach pumps; they clean out her stomach and transfuse fresh blood into her bloodstream.

Montag sits beside his wife, watching the new blood take effect. He suddenly hears laughter from Clarisse's house and goes outside to eavesdrop. He hears a voice, probably that of her uncle; he is talking about the past when men used one another without any qualms. Montag returns home and tries to sleep; but his mind is buzzing with thoughts of Mildred, Clarisse, her uncle, the sleeping tablets, and fire. He finally takes a sleeping tablet himself and slides into a deep slumber.

Notes

This section has Montag coming face to face with his own empty world. First Clarisse upsets him with her fresh opinions, unconventional thoughts, and probing question, all of which make him face his own dull conventionality and dissatisfaction. Entering his dark home, he sees his distant wife, who is in a deep sleep, thanks to her sleeping pills. When he realizes that she has overdosed, he feels himself being torn apart. Adding to his misery is the awful sound of two jet bombers flying overhead, reminding him that war is imminent.

Montag calls the emergency hospital for help. Emergency technicians quickly invade his house to save Mildred; they show no courtesy or concern, but immediately go to work. It is a frightening scene; the machines that pump Mildred's stomach are enormous. One with a huge tube looks like a "black cobra;" as it crawls inside

Mildred, its “eye” seems capable of gazing into her soul. After reviving their patient, the two orderlies deliver the terrifying news that overdoses are very common in this futuristic society; they are always on call to handle such situations. The sense of foreboding in the scene is overwhelming.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Guy Montag - Montag is the protagonist and central character of the novel. Throughout the plot, he steadily grows and changes; by the end of the book, he is a completely different person.

At the start of the novel, Montag is a total conformist who has bought into the totalitarian system in which he lives without thought or question. He is married to Mildred, an insipid woman who spends her days in front of three television sets and lulls herself into sleep at night with music and sleeping pills.

Montag works for the government as a fireman, burning the homes of “criminals” who dare to possess books and setting loose the Mechanical Hound to track down those victims who dare to.....

Mildred Montag - Mildred, normally called Millie in the book, is Montag’s wife and the epitome of conformity. She is a product of the totalitarian system, having allowed her self to be fully shaped by the norms of society. She spends her days in front of three television screens, never having a thought of her own. She falls into a deep sleep each night with the help of sleeping pills and music piped into her ears. Her insipid lifestyle is further reflected in her emaciated body and chemically dyed hair.

Mildred is totally indifferent to her husband, treating him as if he were almost invisible. Although she has time to talk to her female neighbors about their television dream world, she never.....

Captain Beatty - Captain Beatty is Montag’s boss at the firehouse and his nemesis. Like Montag, Beatty has a curious mind. In the past, it is obvious that he has read a variety of books, for he often quotes from them. But unlike Montag, Beatty is a staunch supporter of the system, never questioning its rules. He reiterates his firm belief that books are evil over and over again. He is also determined that every last book will be destroyed by his firemen.

Beatty is continually a threat to Montag. From almost the beginning of the novel, he.....

Professor Faber - Faber was a professor of English before the new laws supplanted the need for literature teachers. Now living by himself, he passes his time recalling the books he has read in the past and tinkering with new inventions. When Montag is desperately in need of a friend and confidante, he thinks about Faber. He recalls that he once saw the old professor hiding something under his shirt, which obviously was a book. As a result, Montag thinks he may find for himself a helper and

Clarisse McClellan - Clarisse is a total non-conformist and the seventeen-year-old neighbor of Montag. She is refreshingly different, not afraid to be herself. She believes in old-fashioned values, dreams, and aspirations and talks about the beauty in the smell of a flower or in the soft feel of grass. She is also.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Fahrenheit 451 is divided into three parts, each with its own title. Part I is titled “The Hearth and the Salamander.” The overriding symbol in this section is of the salamander that lives through fire. In this section, the setting, the conflict, and most of the key characters are introduced. At the end of the section, Clarisse asks Montag the all-important question, “Are you happy?” Montag will spend the rest of the novel dealing with his

unhappiness and trying to fix it. The conflict is, therefore, clearly delineated in this first section.

Part II is devoted to the rising action of the plot and is appropriately entitled "The Sieve and the Sand." The symbol in this section comes in a flashback to Montag's childhood, when he was challenged to try and fill a sieve with sand. He was too young to understand the total futility of his.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Throughout the book, the key themes of conformity, apathy, stagnancy and censorship are shown in a variety of ways. Beatty and Mildred, both symbols of the totalitarian system, live vapid, meaningless lives and cannot escape. At first, Montag is also caught in the system, but his mind still longs for knowledge. He is completely intrigued by Clarisse, a symbol of non-conformity and free thought and.....

STUDY QUESTIONS / ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Discuss the gradual development of Montag throughout the plot. Compare and contrast him to Beatty.
2. Make a list of the people in the novel who contribute to Montag's growing self-awareness and explain what they teach him.
3. Explain the relationship of the title of the book to its meaning.

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS

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