

# Fahrenheit 451

## Study Guide

by Michael Poteet

For the novel by Ray Bradbury

CD Version



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Progeny Press

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**Fahrenheit 451 Study Guide**  
A Progeny Press Study Guide  
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## Synopsis

Guy Montag, a fireman of the future, is responsible for starting fires, not stopping them. In his society, books have been banned—all books, save the firemen's own rule books, which contain the ominous order, "Burn everything." Montag finds pleasure in enforcing the *status quo*—which is that pleasure is the ultimate good, and intellectual pursuits are bad because they breed dissatisfaction and superiority—until one autumn evening when a teenage neighbor, Clarisse McClellan, asks him a simple, haunting question: "Are you happy?"

The question takes on greater urgency when Montag discovers that his wife Mildred has overdosed on pills in a suicide attempt. After she is perfunctorily and mechanically revived by technicians, she has no memory of her actions and resumes her distraction-filled days as though nothing has happened. She continues to insist she is happy, spending her time in the ironically named "living room" with her televised, life-sized "family" entertaining her from three wall-sized screens.

The final shock to Montag's complacency occurs when he and his fellow firemen respond to an alarm at 11 North Elm Street, where a woman possesses a contraband library. Rather than passively submit to the firemen's kerosene, *she* lights the match that ignites her books and herself. As a result of this self-immolation, Montag clearly sees a new truth: "There must be something in books, things we can't imagine. . . ." And perhaps, he thinks, that something can heal not only his life and his marriage, but also his happiness-hunting society.

And so Montag begins to read forbidden books that *he* has hidden in *his* home, putting his career and life in danger. With the help of Faber, a former professor of literature, Montag seeks a way to help—or force—his society to remember what it has forgotten. With Fire Captain Beatty, the firemen, and their lethal Mechanical Hound in pursuit of him, Montag races against time to save a society unaware that it is heading toward self-destruction.

## Part Two: “The Sieve and the Sand”

### Section 2

#### Analysis:

1. Identify the source of these words Montag reads aloud: “That favourite subject, Myself.” How do Montag and Mildred’s differing reactions to this quote develop their characters?
2. Faber alludes to the myth of Hercules and Antaeus. Look up Antaeus and Hercules. How does that story apply to the society of *Fahrenheit 451*? To what extent do you think it applies to your society today?
3. In literature, a *foil* is an object or character who, by contrast, calls attention to or enhances the traits and qualities of another object or character. How might Faber and Montag be considered foils to each other in Part Two? Support your response with specific references to the text.

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4. Faber reads the book of Job to Montag “so [Montag] can remember.” What does Montag want to remember, and how might Job be a text that will help him remember it? What significance do you see in the fact that Bradbury chose to have Faber read this biblical book in particular?
5. What does the conversation between Mildred and her friends tell us about the society of *Fahrenheit 451*? Support your answer with specific references to the text.
6. Research and read in full the poem Montag reads aloud to Mildred and her friends. Why do you think Bradbury has chosen to place this poem in Montag’s mouth? What relevance do both it and its author have to the characters and context of *Fahrenheit 451*?

### **Dig Deeper:**

7. Near the beginning of Part Two, Mildred protests to Montag, “Why should I read? What for?” How would you answer that question for yourself?

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Why should Christians read the Bible? When responding, consider Nehemiah 8:1–10; Psalm 119:9–11, 105; John 20:31; Romans 15:4; and 2 Timothy 3:16–17.

8. Early in Part Two, Montag swears, using the name of Jesus and God as an expletive. Why do you think people do this? *Is* swearing wrong? When someone swears, should we stop listening to that person, or if it is in a book, should we stop reading that book? Why?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9–13; Philippians 4:8. How do these verses say we, as Christians, should conduct ourselves? How should we deal with un-Christ-like behavior in non-Christians? How should we deal with it in Christians? How do you apply this to hearing a person swear or reading a book that contains swear words?

9. At one point, Mildred angrily asks Montag, “Who’s more important, me or that Bible?” Read Matthew 10:34–39 and Mark 7:9–13. How might Jesus’ words bear on Mildred’s question?

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10. In the subway, Montag tries to read as much as possible of his Bible in the hopes that he will absorb some of its words. Identify the passage Montag is trying to read. How does this biblical passage influence your understanding of this scene in Bradbury's novel?
11. Reread the description of the advertising in the subway and of the crowd's reactions to it. Compare this passage with Genesis 3:1–7. What symbolism occurs in both texts, and how does it help Bradbury develop his theme(s)?
12. After Montag has read to Mildred all afternoon, he realizes neither he nor she can understand what he has been reading: "Poor Millie, he thought. Poor Montag, it's mud to you, too. But where do you get help, where do you find a teacher this late?" What has Montag realized he needs? What is this commonly called in business and education? Read Acts 8:26–35. In what ways is this passage parallel to Montag's situation?
13. Read Proverbs 1:8–9; 16:20; 1 Corinthians 4:15–16; 1 Thessalonians 1:6–7; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–9; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2:1–2; 3:14–15; Titus 2:6–8. According to these verses, what is one way in which Christians can learn and put into practice what we have learned? As we mature in our life and knowledge, what do these verses suggest we are to do?



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14. Late in Part Two, Montag reflects on his relationship with Faber:

[T]he old man would go on with this talking and this talking, drop by drop, stone by stone, flake by flake. His [Montag's] mind would well over at last and he would not be Montag any more, this the old man told him, assured him, promised him. He would be Montag-plus-Faber, fire plus water, and then, one day, after everything had mixed and simmered and worked away in silence, there would be neither fire nor water, but wine. . . . Even now he could feel the start of the long journey, the leave-taking, the going-away from the self he had been.

How is Montag's relationship to Faber like and unlike a Christian's relationship to Christ through the Holy Spirit? Consider Romans 7:21–25, 2 Corinthians 2:15 and 5:17, Romans 5:5, Philippians 3:12–14, and Galatians 2:20 when preparing your response.

15. As Montag goes to meet Faber for the first time in Part Two, he asks Mildred:

“Millie? Does the White Clown love you? . . . Does your ‘family’ love you, love you *very* much, love you with all their heart and soul, Millie?”

He felt her blinking slowly at the back of his neck. “Why’d you ask a silly question like that?”

Later, when the ladies come over to watch the White Clown, Montag reads a portion of “Dover Beach” to them:

“Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

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Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain. . . .”

How does the passage from “Dover Beach” illuminate and illustrate Montag’s questions of Mildred and their experiences so far in *Fahrenheit 451*?

Do you think this passage from “Dover Beach” is an accurate description of the world as we know it? Read Matthew 6:19–21; Romans 8:18–24; 1 Corinthians 13; Philippians 3:7–14; 1 John 3:16–18. How do these verses illustrate or expand on the ideas from this portion of “Dover Beach”?

16. As Faber examines Montag’s Bible, he comments,

Lord, how they’ve changed it in our ‘parlors’ these days. Christ is one of the ‘family’ now. I often wonder if God recognizes His own son the way we’ve dressed him up, or is it dressed him down? He’s a regular peppermint stick now, all sugar-crystal and saccharine when he isn’t making veiled references to certain commercial projects that every worshiper *absolutely* needs.

How does Faber’s evaluation of his society compare with what you see in your society? Do you think only “worldly society” does this to Christ, or does some of this attitude and practice sneak into “Christian culture” also? Do you think Jesus approves of Christian merchandising? Why? List specific examples throughout your answer.

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17. Faber calls himself a coward because he did not speak up on behalf of those who were persecuted for being intellectuals: “I’m one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the ‘guilty,’ but I did not speak and thus became guilty myself.” Read Esther 4:6–16; Job 29:11–17; Psalm 72:1–4, 12–15; Matthew 25:41–46; and Luke 16:19–25. What do these passages teach about opportunities and obligations to speak “up and out,” as Faber says, on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves? How can you follow these teachings?
  
18. Faber critiques his society for being “rootless,” for giving up the rich nourishment once found (among other places) in books. The society of *Fahrenheit 451* suffers from a collective amnesia. George Santayana wrote in *The Life of Reason* (Vol. 1, 1905), “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Read Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 8:10–20; Psalm 106:6–15; Jeremiah 6:16–19; John 14:25–26; Acts 2:42; 2 Peter 1:12–15; and Revelation 2:2:4–5. What do these texts teach about the importance of memory, both personal and corporate, in the life of faith? How do such passages as Isaiah 43:16–21 and 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 help define faithful remembering?

### **Optional Activities:**

1. Find and support an organized effort to give Bibles to those who do not have them, or plan a project to support Bible translation efforts. Organizations include International Bible Society ([www.ibs.org](http://www.ibs.org)); American Bible Society ([www.americanbible.org](http://www.americanbible.org)); Wycliffe Bible Translators ([www.wycliffe.org](http://www.wycliffe.org)); The Gideons International ([www.gideons.org](http://www.gideons.org)); or research your own church’s or denomination’s resources.

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2. The juxtaposition of the biblical text and the “Denham’s Dentifrice” commercial in the subway symbolizes a conflict of value systems. Research the amount of advertising to which people in your country are exposed. Select a number of radio, television, and/or Internet advertisements and analyze them critically. What values do they convey, explicitly or implicitly, and by what methods do they convey them? How well do these values agree with the values of Christian faith and life? Share the results of your research with others.
3. In late 20th- and early 21st-century America, producers of goods and services were increasingly tapping “the Christian marketplace,” releasing clothes, music, movies, books, and more aimed at Christian consumers. To what extent is it appropriate and right for Christians to buy specifically Christian products? Are some Christian products more good or necessary than others? How do or ought Christians negotiate between engaging the rest of consumer culture and remaining apart from it? Biblical texts that might inform your discussion include but are not limited to: Matthew 5:13–16; 6:19–21; Mark 7:17–23; John 17:14–18; 1 Corinthians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 6:14–15; Revelation 18:4–8, 11–13.
4. Identify an individual or group in your community whom others ignore or oppress, a person or persons who, for whatever reason, have been rendered “voiceless.” Form a plan to speak “up and out” on their behalf, in the name of Jesus Christ. Go beyond charitable works and actively articulate why you do what you are doing for them. Avoid being condescending, always reminding others, and yourselves, that you are “unworthy servants” of a Master who demands justice, and you are only doing your duty (see Luke 17:10).
5. Reflect on Faber’s words when Montag first meets with him (“Mr. Montag, you are looking at a coward . . .”) in conjunction with the well-known poem “First They Came . . .” (the text offered here is a variant translation from the original German, as found on the Boston, Massachusetts Holocaust Memorial):

They came first for the Communists,  
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist.  
Then they came for the Jews,  
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew.

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Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Catholics,  
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.  
Then they came for me,  
and by that time no one was left to speak up.

Think about parallels between this poem and Faber's words. Research the life of the poem's author, the Rev. Martin Niemöller. What led him to write these words? Share the results of your research and your personal reflection and meditation with others in written, verbal, or multi-media form.

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18. Scripture consistently exhorts God's people to remember God and God's grace toward them. The law given to Moses warns against the consequences of forgetting God (Deut. 8) and presents practical ways in which the people can both remember their identity and communicate it to future generations (Deut. 6). When the people forget God, to whom they belong, disaster follows (Psalm 106; Jeremiah 6); when they remember, they can receive and experience salvation (Revelation 2). The Holy Spirit helps us remember Jesus' teachings (John 14), as do our spiritual leaders (2 Peter 1), and Christians follow the discipline of reading and reflecting on the Scriptures together (Acts 2:42). Faithful remembering, however, "extends far beyond nostalgic recall . . . reverence for the past is merged with relevance in the present," as 1 Corinthians 11's description of the Lord's Supper demonstrates. [Ryken, *et al.*, 702–03] The Greek word *anamnesis* (vv. 24, 25), in fact, carries overtones of bringing what is remembered from the past into the present. Faithful memory is ultimately oriented to the future, so that, through Isaiah, God can go so far as to say, "Forget the former things . . ." (43:18). God's people are not to remember the past for its own sake, but to gain from it nourishment for the present and sustaining hope for the future.

### Part Three: "Burning Bright" Section 1

#### Vocabulary:

1. aesthetic; 2. luminous, limned, smouldering; 3. pedants, prattle, incessantly; 4. dilate; 5. squanders; 6. scythe, convolutions; 7. valise; 8. litterateur

#### Elements of Literature:

##### Symbolism:

1. Interpretations may vary; accept reasonable responses supported by specific reference to the text. Generally speaking, Bradbury invests fire in Part Three, and throughout the book, with two opposite meanings: the power to create and the power to destroy. Fire holds these contradictory meanings together in a single image. For example, when Montag burns his house as Part Three begins, he is destroying: he literally burns his house, but, symbolically, he burns his old life as well (all evidence of his relationship with Mildred; Captain Beatty). As Part Three ends, however, readers see fire as the power to create: the ragtag group of "rememberers" gathers around a fire that "was not burning" but "was warming." The fire here symbolizes the light of knowledge these men hope to bring to their world.

2. Interpretations may vary. The war's symbolic significance could be assessed from several angles, one of which is the fact that it breaks out shortly after the residents of the city have been absorbed in watching the Mechanical Hound's pursuit of Montag; as Granger says, "And the war's begun . . . and the city is there, all wrapped up in its own coat of a thousand colors"—in this context, the allusion may be to dreaming, not as a means of divine revelation (as in Joseph's story in Genesis) but in dreaming as the opposite of reality, or it may be to a perceived "favored son" status in which Americans believe they are more deserving than the rest of the world. As we have repeatedly seen, the culture of the novel is based on dreams, illusion, and fantasy. The war is a sudden intrusion from the outside, even though it has been building throughout the novel. We do not know the causes for it, but that narrative choice is significant, because neither do the characters in the novel. The war, then, could symbolize judgment on the novel's society; indeed, in Part Three, the narrator suggests it be assigned this meaning: "Montag saw the flirt of a great metal fist over the far city, and he knew the scream of the jets that would follow, and say, after the deed, *disintegrate, leave no stone on another, perish. Die.*" The text alludes to Jesus' prediction of the fate of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Matt. 24:2 and parallels). This meaning of the war has been hinted at earlier in the book—for example, when Montag asks Mildred if their society's self-absorbed isolation and the rest of the world's resentment lies behind the fact of "two atomic wars since 1990"—but, in Part Three and its vivid image of judgment on the city, that meaning becomes explicit.

3. Answers will vary because symbolism is in the eye of the beholder. Use the following as patterns for comparison. *Montag's house*: Literal Function: place in which he lived, now being destroyed, burned, because he kept books; Symbolic Function: Montag is burning his old life. He seems almost to take pleasure in burning the beds and the parlor walls in particular. He seems ready to turn his back on, destroy, all he once was. *River*: Literal Function: Montag jumps into the river to escape the Mechanical Hound. Symbolic Function: Might be considered a symbolic death or baptism. When he goes in, he is Montag, but while in the river he changes clothes—"drowns" his old clothes, the "old man." He leaves the old technological, city Montag behind and rises out of the river into the pastoral (idyllic rural) life. He also goes in a man with a history and ability to function in his society, and emerges almost helpless and innocent. *Railroad*: Literal Function: Gives Montag a path to follow to find the men he has heard of. Symbolic Function: The railroad was once a lifeblood of transportation and commerce between cities and between the rural and urban. Montag follows this track