Center for the Book
at the
New Hampshire
State Library

Book Notes

October 2007 Vol. 3 , Supplement

Wrapping Up The Big Read: New Hampshire Reads *Fahrenheit 451*

By Mary A. Russell, Director
NH Center for the Book

We kicked off our Big Read event on October 1 at a reception hosted by the New Hampshire State Library where Fire Captain Beatty -- portrayed brilliantly by actor Len Deming -- explained to us why we were better off without books. I am pleased to report that New Hampshire did not heed his warning. We read *Fahrenheit 451* and attended the nearly 100 different Big Read events held during October and early November 2007. There were film screenings, discussions about civil liberties, a panel on the role of media in our lives, lectures and a radio program about the history of science fiction, an episode of NHPR's The Exchange taped with a live audience, exhibits on books we would save from the flames, potlucks, and lots of book discussions. Perhaps the headline for this issue should be New Hampshire READ *Fahrenheit 451*.

This special issue of Book Notes collects information about our Big Read and *Fahrenheit 451*. It includes notes from participants on some of the events and discussions that took place, as well as articles on the ideas and issues raised by Bradbury's work. If you haven't read *Fahrenheit 451* yet I hope that the information included in this issue will inspire you to read it. If you have read it, you will find lots of suggestions in this issue for further reading. Bradbury said it best: "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." Don't let that happen; keep reading!

http://bigreadnh.blogspot.com

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts, in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest. It is designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American popular culture by providing citizens with the opportunity to read and discuss a single book within their communities. The Big Read: New Hampshire Reads *Fahrenheit 451* was a project of the Center for the Book at the New Hampshire State Library in partnership with the New Hampshire Humanities Council.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Ideas for Further Reading 2
Media Obsession in Fahrenheit 451 by Mark Timney 3
The Exchange at the NHSL 4
Saving Books from the Flames 4
The Film Falls Short 4
Speaking of Books 5
The History of Science Fiction by Jeanne Cavelos 6
Support the Center for the Book 7
SNOB Film Festival 8

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Fahrenheit 451
Ideas for Further Reading

One of the things that makes a book great is that it can serve as the beginning of a journey. *Fahrenheit 451* is full of ideas and images that spark connections in the minds of readers to other books that offer additional perspectives on those ideas. Bradbury wrote this novel on a rented typewriter in the UCLA library and the book is full of quotes and references to books Bradbury pulled from the library's shelves as he wrote. Compiled here are some of the titles that came up in New Hampshire's Big Read discussions of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Animal Farm. George Orwell. (1946)

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress. Sijie Dai. (2001)

Brave New World. Aldous Huxley. (1932)

Burn. James Patrick Kelly. (2005)

"Dover Beach." Matthew Arnold. The full text of this poem is at http://www.eecs.harvard.edu/~keith/poems/dover.html

Ella Minnow Pea: A Progressively Lipogrammatic Epistolary Fable. Mark Dunn. (2001)

The Giver. Lois Lowry. (1993)

Gulliver's Travels. Jonathan Swift. (1726)

The Handmaid's Tale. Margaret Atwood. (1986)

"Harrison Bergeron." *Welcome to the Monkey House*. Kurt Vonnegut. (1988, c1968)

The Human Stain. Philip Roth. (2000)

Nineteen Eighty-four. George Orwell. (1949)

Never Let Me Go. Kazuo Ishiguro. (2006)

Plowing the Dark. Richard Powers. (2000)

The Republic. Plato. (360 B.C.E.)

The Shockwave Rider. John Brunner. (1975)

Too Loud a Solitude. Bohumil Hrabal. (1990)

Waiting for the Barbarians. J. M. Coetzee. (1982)

Walden. Henry David Thoreau. (1854)

Media Obsession in *Fahrenheit 451*

By Mark Timney, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Journalism
Keene State College

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is best known as a cautionary tale about censorship, but the book has another, and equally important, message. It alerts us to what can happen when a society willingly becomes obsessed with media—a tragedy equally as frightening as one about a government that keeps its citizens from reading, and a future which some suggest we're heading toward.

Fahrenheit 451, which was written when the study of mass communication was in its infancy, is still one of the most important works of fiction about media. It foretold three present-day mass media theories: Media Equation, Media Dependency, and Media Hegemony.

The simplest of these theories is Media Equation, which explains the unconscious way we sometimes respond to communication media as if it were human. If you yell "Look out!" to the hero in a scary movie as a monster is closing on him then you've experienced the theory firsthand.

Fahrenheit 451 depicts media equation on steroids. The story's characters treat the fictional media characters in their world as 'family.' Montag's wife, Mildred, has far more of a relationship with her favorite television show's actors than she does with him. Mildred's friends (who represent the 'norm') are equally detached and are unable to have normal interpersonal relationships because of their media obsession.

This media equation is partly the result of the characters' Media Dependency. This theory suggests the more individuals become dependent on specific media to fulfill their needs, the more important this media will become to them. An example of this is how we value our hometown newspaper because we're typically dependent upon it for local information. This seemingly simplistic theory, however, has a darker and more important component. It also suggests that those dependent on a few media outlets for information can all too easily be uninformed, misinformed, or misled by these outlets.

"*Fahrenheit 451* . . . is still one of the most important works of fiction about media."

In *Fahrenheit 451*, citizens are entirely dependent upon a highly controlled media for much of their entertainment and all of their news. They constantly watch television, listen to their 'Seashells' (portable radios) and appear to have only one news source. They're easily distracted, uninformed, misinformed and misled. Their lack of knowledge about the war that soon envelops them is one of the more prominent examples.

This media dependency, in turn, allows the book's government to exercise Media Hegemony. This is the theory that a dominant class can (and will, accidentally or on purpose) use the media as a tool to make its ideas the dominant ideas for the entire society. Advertising is also part of hegemony. A corporation can dominate a culture by using media advertising to convince consumers to buy products which make the corporation even more powerful.

Media Hegemony is illustrated in virtually every chapter of *Fahrenheit 451*. It's there in the government's ban on books, propaganda broadcasts about the looming war, and in the way the manhunt for Montag is 'spun' and then 'faked' in the news, to cite just a few examples.

Bradbury presents us with a world quite unlike our own. Yet, as intended, portions of *Fahrenheit 451* are eerily familiar. Media censorship, hegemony, dependency, and equation are all around us: a major broadcast outlet holds back news stories that might anger its conservative viewers; corporations spin media stories that deny or downplay global warming; every other person we pass on the street seems to be wearing an iPod; and millions of people are totally infatuated with celebrities and reality television.

Does this mean we're heading toward our own *Fahrenheit 451*? Bradbury's book suggests that's only possible if we first allow our media infatuation to become an obsession, spurn critical thinking, and are willing to settle for meaningless media content.

Dr. Mark Timney was a guest on a special Big Read episode of NH Public Radio's *The Exchange* which focused on *Fahrenheit 451* and was recorded before a live audience at the NH State Library on October 10, 2007. In addition to being an associate professor of journalism at Keene State College, Dr. Timney is a scholar for the New Hampshire Humanities Council's "Speculate: a new past, a different present, an out-of-this-world future" book program. He also confesses to being a life-long science fiction fan.

Toward the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, Guy Montag finds a group of men who have formed a loosely organized rebellion to save books. The rebels save books that represented "bits and pieces of history and literature and international law. Each man had a book he wanted to remember, and did." Inspired by this idea, we began asking earlier this year "Which Book Would You Save from the Flames?" We have received numerous responses – some predictable, some inspired, all interesting – and all posted on our website at http://bigreadnh.blogspot.com.

The Exchange at the NH State Library

My name's Jack King. I'm a student at Tilton School in New Hampshire, and I was lucky enough to go to a radio show taping about *Fahrenheit 451*. When our school librarian, Becky Albert, asked me if I would like to go to this radio show taping, I decided I'd come along and see what it was all about, because I personally loved the book. I expected it to be interesting, but I didn't expect it to be like it really turned out to be. Yes, it was extremely interesting, and, somehow, *fun*. But what was so significantly great about it was that it made me understand the meaning of the novel so much more than I did at first! There were people who were professionals at understanding these kinds of things, and who were generous enough to take the time to explain them. They explained in depth exactly what Ray Bradbury meant by writing this novel, which was to warn us against the rapid development in technology, and they gave so many examples of these things in the real world. They had parts of the novel pre-recorded and acted out. And one more thing they did was allow people to ask any questions about the novel, whether it be about its relation to the real world, or simple questions about the story line. I can admit, though, that I couldn't find enough courage to go up and ask a question, even though I had so many flying through my head after hearing this radio show. I thoroughly enjoyed going to this radio show, and after experiencing it, I would love to attend another radio show such as this one.

Fahrenheit 451, the Film, Falls Short

Is it possible to capture the powerful themes and language of *Fahrenheit 451* on film? If you have watched Francois Truffaut's 1966 version, the answer is a resounding "No." When it was determined that director Francois Truffaut would make the film, Ray Bradbury said, "There's a chance of doing it right." And in a recent interview, he said, "The movie was a mixed blessing. It didn't follow the novel as completely as it should have."

Perhaps it fell short because Truffaut was not American and, in fact, spoke no English on the set. Maybe it was his stilted version of the 'future,' which looked like the 60's, as exemplified by Julie Christie's flipped hair and short skirts. Or maybe it was the decision to have Julie Christie play the dual roles of Mildred, Montag's wife, and Clarisse, the neighbor. And not to give anything away, but a central character in the book dies; in the movie, that character lives. Perhaps it was Oskar Werner's stiff performance. Perhaps it was that Faber, Montag's sage advisor, isn't in the movie, and neither is the mechanical hound, that precursor to all the evils of technology.

But watch this film as an example of movie-making in the 60's. Admire Truffaut's stark portrayal of a world without books or thinking; the red, red fire station and truck; and the Nazi-like uniforms of the firemen. And watch it for the beauty of the ending, when books and reading return.

My hope is that someday soon a brilliant film is made of this book, one that portrays the 24th century future that Bradbury envisioned. I hope for a film with actors who know how to act and bring all of the characters to life. As we all discovered in our book groups and ad-hoc, ongoing discussions, *Fahrenheit 451*, although written in 1953, has relevance today and will continue to have relevance. As with any good film, it should excite viewers to read or reread the original work. *Fahrenheit 451* will always be worthy of another read and definitely deserves a better film.

-- Sherry Evans,
Portsmouth Public Library

Speaking of Books ...

In Dunbarton, an intimate group had a very animated discussion about *Fahrenheit 451*. Bradbury put forth such a variety of themes that there was much to analyze. Our group contained some moms with middle school age children, and we centered our discussion on addressing the media's insistence on creating fear and anxiety among the public. How do these moms, we asked, balance the need to keep children safe and vigilant versus instilling optimism, hope, and compassion? World news, terrorism, and kidnappings seem so prevalent that some parents distract their children from printed and voiced articles and some discuss carefully their children's take on things. What is the role of fear?

-- Andrea Douglas
Director
Dunbarton Public Library

At the Kelley Library, we were delighted to see that the Big Read discussion of *Fahrenheit 451* attracted people who had never attended our book discussions before as well as people who come faithfully each month. Virtually everyone agreed that Ray Bradbury had demonstrated an uncanny ability to predict many frightening aspects of today's society, including the obsession with big-screen television empty of serious content and the decline in critical thinking. The most controversial part of the discussion involved the topic of censorship. Some readers defended censorship in certain situations when young people are involved while others expressed concern about where the line is drawn once censorship begins. All in all, the book was definitely thought-provoking and well worth being chosen as the title for New Hampshire's first statewide Big Read.

-- Eleanor Strang
Director
Kelley Library, Salem

In Barrington, participants discussed a variety of issues which *Fahrenheit 451* brought up including the role that overwhelming media played in the book and how we are already seeing this kind of isolation of the individual through technology. They heatedly discussed how the media has an effect on how we perceive and react to modern issues as we rarely know if the media can really be trusted to tell the truth or just a version of the truth that the particular outlet finds acceptable.

The group also had an interesting discussion on the value of the written word versus the value of the spoken or 'remembered.' They talked about whether listening to audiobooks was 'cheating' or if each experience (reading text and listening to a story) had a value of its own.

-- Amy Inglis
Director
Barrington Public Library

The Derry Public Library book group met on October 24. Amid the usual discussion of plot, characters, and Bradbury's prescient insight (from his 1950's perspective) into elements of the future (the role of TV, the decline in reading), etc., we asked the question, "Could this extreme form of repression occur today?" We talked about the movement toward "political correctness" as a subtle and effective way that society itself puts limits on our behavior. We also talked about the increasing use of cameras in public places for surveillance and the repressive régimes that exist around the world today. While we didn't feel that extreme repression would rule in our free, democratic society, it did give us pause to reflect on some of the more subtle ways that mass media, "Big Brother," and social pressures to conform have influenced our lives.

--Jack Robillard
Assistant Director
& Book Group Coordinator
Derry Public Library

The Big Read: NH Reads *Fahrenheit 451*
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And special thanks to the staff of the NH State Library, whose support and hard work made this project possible!

The History of Science Fiction

By Jeanne Cavelos

Science fiction can be said to have one mother and two fathers. Its mother is Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, which is widely considered to be the first true work of science fiction. A lot of people consider it to be a horror novel, written in the tradition of the gothic,a genre that contains many horrific elements - darkness, madness, mysteries,and the supernatural. Shelley intended to write a gothic ghost story, but she ended up creating something different when she decided that Victor Frankenstein would create this creature not through the supernatural but through science. With that plot decision, she created science fiction. She didn't actually include a lot of science in her novel. She talks about some of the different courses that Victor was taking at school, the different authors he studied, the different scientists, but she didn't specifically say how he created the monster. We know it was through science, though, not hocus-pocus or any other means.

When it was first published, no one recognized that Mary Shelley had given birth to this new genre of science fiction. People viewed it very much in the gothic tradition - this tradition of dark, strong emotions that Victor feels. They didn't really understand that this was something new, although Mary Shelley and her husband Percy Shelly did understand. There was actually a preface, supposedly by Mary but actually ghost-written by her husband, that talked about why this book was special and why this book should be allowed to show events that could not happen: because it afforded a perspective, they said, for showing human emotions and the human condition. With this novum Mary Shelley created — the idea that you could bring dead body parts back to life — you could show something about human nature that you could not show any other way. For example, Victor's rejection of the creature: he made it superior to humans, but it horrifies him and everyone else because it is ugly. This shows in a very simple way the superficiality, the cruelty, the self-centered nature of humanity. That is a message you couldn't get across that strongly without using the science fiction element.

"These three authors come together in the use of the novum, which is a key to all science fiction. It is a novelty or innovation that is consistent with what we know of science, or is based on science."

The history of science fiction is also the history of humanity's changing attitudes toward space and time. As we have learned more about space and time, and as our attitudes have changed about it, science fiction has helped us to cope with these changing attitudes and help us to try to understand who we are, what is our place in the universe. Mary Shelley was writing at a time – after the French revolution – when everything seemed to be in chaos, when the great principles of liberty and fraternity seemed to be in doubt. She was also living at a time when people were rejecting the standards of religion and politics and class, so everything was uncertain. She was trying to find some way to explore that—to explore who mankind is and what our place is—and to find some truth in that.

Moving on to the next century, we have two very different writers who are the two fathers of science fiction: Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

Jules Verne is extremely different from Mary Shelley. She was operating out of this dark gothic tradition and she had some very dark feelings that she was working out. Jules Verne was a very optimistic personality. Writing in the 1860s, he thought that the developments in science and technology, the factories, all the changes in the world, were wonderful. He thought that man was going to conquer the universe using technology and that we had the right stuff to make it happen. He got started when he was writing a factual article on the exploration of Africa and he included a sentence saying that exploring Africa would be so much easier if you used a balloon. His editor was so intrigued by this idea that he suggested that Verne write a fictional short story about exploring Africa by balloon instead of the factual article. That sent Jules Verne off on writing what he called "extraordinary voyages" that would follow man on journeys to places he couldn't go:

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http://www.nh.gov/nhsl/bookcenter

Journey to the Center of the Earth, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *From the Earth to the Moon*. In his stories he would show mankind inventing these incredible pieces of technology and he would go into great detail about the technology that would allow them to journey to those new places.

H. G. Wells had a different view of the world. He called his stories "scientific romances," which may be a little misleading. There was not too much of the kind of romance that we think about, but they were great adventures — of heroes going on quests using scientific methods - so in the literary sense they were romances. We know him for *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and *The War of the Worlds*. Many of his works still survive and are well known. He really wanted to use the scientific novum in each of his stories to reveal something about mankind. Wells used the unique perspective provided by science fiction to reveal truths about the society and culture of England in the late 17th century.

These three authors come together in the use of the novum, which is a key to all science fiction. It is a novelty or innovation that is consistent with what we know of science, or is based on science. If you think of Franz Kafka and "The Metamorphosis," he had a novum – a man wakes up one day and finds he has turned into a cockroach – but it is not based on science. It is fantasy. There's no scientific reason that might happen (I hope) so it is not science fiction. But Shelley, Verne, and Wells were all presenting novums that were based on science. Where these three writers separate is in the emotion: Mary Shelley being very dark and focusing on death and madness; Jules Verne being very optimistic and positive; and H. G. Wells exploring the middle ground. They also differ in the kind of story they were telling: Verne was very much on the romantic side, meaning a story of heroes going on adventures; Wells and Shelley were more on the satiric side, revealing the flaws of human nature. They staked out a very diverse territory that is science fiction.

Brian Aldus defines science fiction as "the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge." Writers of science fiction are trying to understand who we are, and what our place is in the universe based on what we know today. As science and technology evolve, our idea of who we are and what our place is changes. We used to think the earth was the center of the universe, that everything was about us, that it was all created for us. Now we wonder if we are one of a billion species out there and insignificant in the course of things, or if we are the only life in a hostile and desolate universe. By exploring these questions of who we are and what our place is, science fiction provides fascinating and valuable insights that can't quite be achieved by any other genre.

Jeanne Cavelos spoke on the History of Science fiction in Keene and at the Christa McAuliffe Planetarium in Concord as part of the Big Read. She was also a guest on a special Big Read episode of NH Public Radio's *The Exchange*. Ms. Cavelos is a writer, editor, scientist, and teacher. Her recent work includes a *Babylon 5* trilogy and *The Science of Star Wars*. She created and serves as the director of Odyssey, an annual six-week writing workshop for writers of fantasy, science fiction and horror held at Saint Anselm College in Manchester.

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The mission of the Center for the Book at the NH State Library is to celebrate and promote reading, books, literacy, and the literary heritage of New Hampshire and to highlight the role that reading and libraries play in enriching the lives of the people of the Granite State.

2007 SNOB (Somewhat North of Boston) Film Festival

By Kristen Vermilyea Harbaugh, Co-Chair, SNOB Film Festival

This year's SNOB Film Festival will celebrate its 6th year on November 9th-11th in downtown Concord. Screenings of over 75 documentaries, features, and shorts will be held at the newlyopened and much-anticipated Red River Theatres on South Main Street and the Annicchiarico Theater on Thompson Street in Concord. Saturday's Student Film Focus will be held at the New Hampshire Technical Institute.

SNOB is organized by a grassroots, all-volunteer committee of people passionate about New Hampshire and independent film. In choosing films for the festival, the committee considers work from around the world as well as the work of Granite State filmmakers. They look especially for films addressing subjects and issues you won't find being addressed at your local multiplex.They strive to bring the filmmakers to the event along with the films and thus provide an opportunity for disussion as well as enjoyment of independent film.

This is the second year SNOB will feature their Filmmaker Challenge and this year we are proud to partner with the Center for the Book at the NH State Library's The Big Read: NH Reads *Fahrenheit 451*. This year's filmmakers were challenged to create a film in 5 days, no more than 4 minutes in length, based upon any of the themes, concepts, or ideas found in this classic book. The challenge was open to anyone – first-time filmmakers as well as those with experience.

We hope to see you at the 2nd Annual SNOB Filmmaker Challenge screening block on Saturday night – come support local filmmakers, The Big Read, and the spirit of independent filmmaking at its best!

http://www.snobfilmfestival.org