

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Discussion about Ray Bradbury with author Jonathan R. Eller- May/June 2018

*Jonathan R. Eller is the Chancellor's Professor of English and Director of the Center for Ray Bradbury Studies at Indiana University. He is the author of the biographies "Becoming Ray Bradbury" and "Ray Bradbury Unbound."*

*The blurb on "Unbound" says, "Eller draws on many years of interviews with Bradbury as well as an unprecedented access to personal papers and private collections to portray the origins and outcomes of Bradbury's countless creative endeavors. The result is the definitive story of how a great American author helped shape his times."*

**SFBC Member: In an interview with Harlan Ellison, Julie Schwartz claims that Bradbury was selling newspapers prior to making his first short story sale. Is this apocryphal or did Schwartz actually help get Bradbury his break into the industry?**

**Eller:** Schwartz began representing SF&F authors in the mid-1930s, and he met Bradbury at the 1939 WorldCon. By 1941 Schwartz felt that Bradbury was mature enough to represent, and negotiated his first (paid) prozine sale that summer. Bradbury sold the afternoon edition of the Los Angeles Herald Examiner at a street corner for nearly four years after graduating from LA High School in 1938; Schwartz and SF writer Edmond Hamilton, another Bradbury mentor, shared a bungalow in LA during the summer of 1941, and Schwartz was able to hand Bradbury his first sales check at the corner stand.

**Peggy Gordon: What writers did Bradbury admire? What were his "go to" books?**

**Eller:** Early on, Poe, Baum, E.R. Burroughs, and fairy tales. By his late teens and early twenties, he enjoyed the work of H.G. Wells, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, Katherine Ann Porter, Eudora Welty, Aldous Huxley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Collier, Somerset Maugham, Luigi Pirandello, and many others; all this is chronicled in *Becoming Ray Bradbury*, including his love of various poets and short story writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He was also influenced by books about writing: *Becoming a Writer* (Brandt), *Characters make Your Story* (Elwood), *How to Write a Play* (Egri; later retitled *The Art of Dramatic Writing*). Again, see the early chapters of *Becoming Ray Bradbury*.

**Bill Lace: Did Bradbury comment about the development and influence of social media, including mediums like Twitter, and make any comparisons to the future in *Fahrenheit 451*?**

**Eller:** These questions came up in countless newspaper, radio, and television interviews with Bradbury as the Information Age progressed. He was optimistic about the technological wonders, but cautionary about the human factor. *F451* is really about "who watches the watchers," As was Huxley's *Brave New World*. He was not attracted to the gadgets, unless they were involved with the Space Program. He wanted to touch and feel and smell an actual book, and to engage with it as a storytelling "friend." Later, he would see that e-books had the potential to reach more readers inexpensively, and he allowed some of his titles to be available in that form. His ideal remained the library, however, because they made books free for readers.

**Richard Whyte: I thought the 2 crime novels Bradbury published in the 1980s ('Death is a Lonely Business' and 'A Graveyard for Lunatics') were exceptional, even for him; why do you think he went back to this genre, and how do you think they stand in relation to his body of work?**

**Eller:** I'll be discussing the significance of these novels in my third (and final) Bradbury biography volume, which is still in an early stage of development. These two novels chronicled his early working environment in 1940s downtown LA (DLB) and 1950s-1960s Hollywood (GL). His own off-trail detective stories had been popular in the mid-1940s, and he wanted to return and write with more maturity in this genre. For Bradbury, the creative hook was his unpublished story, *Where Everything Ends*, which sets up the Venice Beach canal murders of the first novel. But the real impulse, overall, was to look back and chronicle his own developing career in the context of the cultures he so intently observed.

**Jim Robert/Adrienne Clark: We all have those projects we work on that we sort of wish we hadn't. Which of his own work did Bradbury dislike the most? Did Bradbury have any published books that he regretted publishing? Either because of subject matter or felt was incomplete.**

**Eller:** He depended on "the old subcon," as he called his subconscious, to bring up ideas and characters to explore on his typewriter. He loved his stories and characters, but he did hit writer's block a couple of times. The Illinois novel took five years before he made a separate peace and (at Walt Bradbury's suggestion) extracted the stories that he bridged into *Dandelion Wine*; the source novel took another fifty years to complete as *Dandelion Wine*. In his early career he hated slanting to please editors, and rarely did it, even when he needed money. "The Watchers" is an example of slanting to weird tales; it's not a bad Lovecraftian tale. The only book he disliked was *A Memory of Murder*, which gathered the crime stories he no longer had rights to. For the full story on that collection, see *Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction*, chapter 7.

**Alexandra Brown: Was there something specific about carnivals that prompted *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and *The Illustrated Man*? Also, in the latter book, why animated tattoos for the framework of stories?**

**Eller:** A big question, with answers spread all over my three books. The book I co-authored with Bill Touponce (*Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction*) has a great deal of background by Bill on the carnival impulse in Ray's fiction, which originates in RB's enjoyment of carnivalesque reversal and the ability to make fun of ourselves, even as writers. His childhood interactions with small and large circuses and the sideshow acts created vivid memories of Mr. Electrico and the characters he introduced RB to in 1932, including an illustrated man. He draws a distinction between a tattooed man and an illustrated man, where we have a magical element that he would evolve into Mr. Dark; the lonelies and isolatos from all the towns are enslaved through Mr. Dark's tattoos, where he imprisons their souls. The original illustrated man story (*Esquire*, 1950) does not have the element of magic; it's just a murder tale. But his prolog-epilog for his *Illustrated Man* story collection (1951) develops the magical component he would refine and extend in *SW*. His 1948 story "The Black Ferris" sets out the central event he would use to weave the plot of *SW*, replacing the Ferris with the carousel. Again, read my relevant chapters in *Life of Fiction*, *Becoming RB*, and *RB Unbound*.

**Alexandra Brown: At one point Bradbury said Fahrenheit 451 was a commentary about his concern with mass media. Does he still have the same level of concern now that reading is on the increase thanks to options such as audible and ebooks?**

**Eller:** That concern remained in his mind up to his passing in 2012. Late in life, he allowed ebook editions for some of his books, because he saw it as a way to further extend the availability of books for readers everywhere. Ideally, he felt that books should be free, and that's why he championed public libraries. His concern was for the tendency to reshape the reading canon through restrictions based on community and individual preferences (and biases). Some books are diluted by editorial imposition to make them more agreeable to school boards (this was done to F451 itself in the 1960s and 1970s). For Bradbury, books were the authors themselves; to tamper with them was to mutilate them, and destroy the author's meaning. Just get people to stop reading some books, or give them censored versions; that's how you dilute and eventually destroy a culture. That was his view of the subtle danger, even in the age of ebooks.

**Gary Denton: Bradbury said he was a Zen Buddhist, can you tell us more about his religious beliefs. "The secret of life is being in love, and by being in love, you predict yourself. Whatever you want is whatever you get. You don't predict things, you make them. You gotta be a Zen Buddhist, like me: Don't think about things, just do them; don't predict them, just make them."**

**Eller:** Read *Becoming Ray Bradbury*, chapter 3, and *Ray Bradbury Unbound*, chapter 27. He was a great explorer of religions from his late teens on. He would go to various religious services of many cultures. His own settled view is that there are mysteries we can never know; he was more comfortable with the eternal aspects of Steady State than with the beginnings and endings of the Big Bang cosmology. His settled view extends the life force writings of Henri Bergson and Nikos Kazantzakis, especially the latter's *Saviors of God*. Again, read chapter 27 in *Unbound*.

**Eric Bram: I once heard that Bradbury learned to write fiction by forcing himself to write one story every day. Did he save them? There must be thousands of unpublished little stories of his if he did.**

**Eller:** There are between one and two hundred more or less finished story drafts, and several thousand pages of story fragments. For the most part, these are not what he would have considered publishable. He generated ideas every day, and a story would emerge in just a few hours, if the Muse played out for him in a given day. But many stories remained unformed, or rough, and many survive only through an opening page or a concluding page. During the early and mid-1940s, he would draft a story in a day, then spend the week polishing it before sending it on to his agent, Julius Schwartz. This creativity focused on stories until the mid and late 1950s, when he turned more and more to adapting his work for stage and screen. This is the central core of *Ray Bradbury Unbound*, which covers these transitional decades.

**Seth A. Milman: To what extent did Bradbury intentionally insert theme/symbolism into his stories? For example, when forming a story, was theme/symbolism something he thought about and purposefully wrote it, or was it more of a side effect of the stories he came up with?**

**Eller:** He tried to eliminate self-conscious, rational, sequential thought from the initial state of writing. He was more than half serious when he said that his characters emerged and wrote their own stories. This was the deal he made with his own mind. Self-consciousness could enter only when he revised, and he hated it even then. He was at heart a fantasy writer, who made his own way around all genre rules of fiction writing. A strong emotion was usually at the core of a good story idea, and his best stories center on some thematic aspect of what makes us human. He was not a controlled or choreographed writer.

**William West/Tania Kyriakou: Which of Bradbury's works was he most proud of?**

**Eller:** Something Wicked This Way Comes. It is his fullest exploration of the nature of good and evil; it comes from his own childhood memories; and it evolved in various forms for seventeen years before it reached print in 1962. It was his first fully-formed success as a novelist; F451 emerged from an extended story in 1953, but he would be more than twenty years into his professional career before he succeeded in the novel form with SW.

**Jim Dean: Which of his homegrown "prognostications" did Bradbury most strongly believe would actually come to pass? (Tech, Social, Political)**

**Eller:** He felt that we would eventually legislate away our own freedoms, especially our freedom of the imagination. That happens slowly and without many obvious signals, which is what made the loss of imagination through visual distractions most dangerous in his own mind. He sensed there would be indicators of the coming mandated conformity, and he believed that pedestrians would be the first indicator species, like the frog species that are monitored as indicators of environmental pollution. If walking at night becomes abnormal, then people would be led slowly into a world where they stay at home, watch the visual wonders of their wall screens, and society becomes controllable. In F451, Clarisse is one of the last pedestrians. She walks late at night, and meets Montag coming home from a shift in the firehouse.

**William West: Are there other invented technologies besides headphones that Bradbury came up with in his works?**

**Eller:** Ray Bradbury was not tech savvy, but his Wellsian "what if" habit of projecting the technological trappings of the day onto future applications popularized several "things to come." These items were already in development in many cases, and they were touched on by other SF writers from time to time, but he popularized them out of his own imagination before they became common place. In addition to the "seashell" headphones, he made such things as wall-screen televisions an integral part of Fahrenheit 451 and virtual reality the focus of his story "The Veldt." There is a Russian Rianovosti diagram of things that Bradbury anticipated, and it's reproduced on many sites under the title "Ray Bradbury Predictions Fulfilled."

**D'Arcy Ward: How did Ray really feel about being labeled a Science Fiction writer?**

**Eller:** Again, so much of this is in Life and Becoming and Unbound. He was described by Tony Boucher and other astute critics as a writer who did the most to bring SF into the literary mainstream, but who

never really wrote SF at all. The genre plots he drew from science fiction were simply armatures for writing about the human heart. He wanted SF to be more than space opera, even as space opera became excellent work in the hands of many more contemporary writers. He was more interested in how we would respond to Otherness, and to cosmological knowledge, as humans, not as space merchants or space marines. He had a valid position, but it was sometimes misunderstood as critical of his own Golden Age peers. A complex topic, for sure. He never asked for Bantam's crown as "The greatest living science fiction writer," but he had to live with it.

**Jan van den Berg: How does *Dandelion Wine* fit in with his sf works?**

**Eller:** DW is usually shelved and categorized with mainstream literature. It is very Whitmanesque in its tone and style, and represents the first published portion of his Green Town trilogy. All of these were assembled from stories that he began to publish in the mid-1940s, notably "The Night," which was re-written for *Dandelion Wine* as a chronicle of that first moment when we realize that our parents cannot protect us from darkness, or, eventually, from death. In structure, he followed the same process that he used in building the *Martian Chronicles*. He pulled about eighteen stories together that shared a common locale (this time, from the Illinois novel typescript, rather than Mars tales) and bridged them with inter-chapters into the story of summer, 1928, in a Midwest town. Unlike the *Chronicles*, though, bridges and stories lack titles or chapter page breaks. DW is closer to being a novel in form than the *Chronicles*, and in this aspect DW resembles *From the Dust returned* in structure than it does MC. So there are similarities in the way he would form all of his early story collections and novelized story cycles, but DW is distinct from the SF in purpose. You can't know the future unless you know the past, and DW is an exercise in time and memory. It is closer to his tales of realism (*The Next in Line*, *Interval in Sunlight*) than it is to his science fiction.

**Martin Dudley/Eva Sable: What media (film, TV, play) adaptation of his works did he like or dislike?**

**Eller:** He was at heart an actor, and would have pursued such a career if he hadn't realized early on that he couldn't memorize lines (a master storyteller yes, but not an actor locked into memorial repetition). He loved his 1960s stage adaptation of *Dandelion Wine*, where he interposes his older self trying to remember the profound life changes of 1928. He enjoyed his stage versions of *F451*, where he allows Clarisse to live on, and Beatty to find some redemption in his relationship with Montag. And he enjoyed writing and producing all 65 episodes of *Ray Bradbury Theater*, even as some of the episodes lacked distinction. He loved Disney's *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit*, using his script. And he liked most of the Hitchcock episodes of his stories, whether he adapted them or not. He disliked the feature films where his input was limited or nonexistent: the direction and outside script of *The Illustrated Man*, for instance, and the uninspired direction in the NBC miniseries of *The Martian Chronicles*. He felt that the *Twilight Zone* adaptation of *I Sing the Body Electric*, even with his script, was mis-cut when broadcast. For the details of his relationship with the *Twilight Zone* and Rod Serling, see *Unbound*, chapter 28; for his take on François Truffaut's *F451*, see *Unbound*, chapter 36.

**Martin Dudley: Did he ever meet Tom Waits? They seem to mine a lot of the same melancholic nostalgia vein. And both seem to like old, neglected carnivals and circuses.**

**Eller:** He may have been aware of Tom Waits, through the musical tastes of his four daughters; that's how he came to know David Bowie, who was greatly inspired by Bradbury. I agree with your assessment of the parallels here, but I can't say for certain that they met. Our archives may have letters, but we are still in the process of accessioning the letters from those later decades of Ray's career.

**Steve Staab: I was recently floored by Dandelion Wine, especially its exuberance and love of life. I couldn't help but think of Whitman. Did Ray adore "Song of Myself" as it seems to me?**

**Eller:** Bradbury knew Whitman's work well; his copy of Leaves of Grass includes a marginal note to keep Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric!" in mind as a possible story title; leading to one of his best-known stories and the title story of an excellent Bradbury collection. His mystical merging of human and machine in such stories, and his concern about how we would treat our future "mechanical children," can be seen in much of his work. Just look at the berry-picking episode early in Dandelion Wine, and you see the "I'm alive" Whitmanesque inspiration for the entire novelized story cycle gathered in those pages. Although untitled in Dandelion Wine, this episode was previously a free-standing story titled "Illumination." Whitman begins "Song of Myself" with "I," and ends this long poem with "you." Bradbury gift is similar in intent as readers receive the insights of Dandelion Wine.

**Martin Dudley: Also... a lot of his books are covered in schools. Did he consciously write for all ages, or did he change anything for younger readers. My failing memory seems to recall The Halloween Tree was sold as a children's book.**

**Eller:** He resisted the Knopf marketing of HT as a children's book; the central event, the giving of a year of life from each friend so that Pipkin can live, is a child's memory with profound impact on adult sensibility. If you can get to my four-text edition of HT, you'll see that the publishers deleted or altered about 1800 words in styling the book; these changes also pushed some passages (by editing or deletion) toward a younger sensibility.

**Katie Polley: What were some unknown/little known influences on Bradbury? Or to ask another way, who is a (perhaps unexpected) writer he admired and strove to emulate?**

**Eller:** By the middle war years (1943-44), he had realized that emulation was dead end for him; he had to write about his own childhood experiences, projected into the adult life, and maintain his own poetic, metaphor-rich style. He would always feel inspired by writers like John Collier, the early Eudora Welty, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck; late in life, Ray discovered that John Steinbeck had read Bradbury stories to his two sons in the 1950s. You'll find that structurally, the rich inter-chapters of The Martian Chronicles are kin to the inter-chapters of The Grapes of Wrath. But Ray went his own way, convinced that if you tell truths, you automatically have a style. You need to read chapters 8-18 of Becoming Ray Bradbury to get a full sense of the authors that inspired him.

**Heather Prince: Since Bradbury did not consider his work to be science fiction, what science fiction authors did he enjoy and how did he feel about his overall effect on the genre despite his insistence that most of his work did not fall into it?**

**Eller:** Many of the golden age authors were his mentors early on, and he continued to read their work and the work of others with rich imaginative powers, even after he stopped reading science fiction in a broad sense around 1944. The authors who conjured up Otherness, and alienation, and the interplay of the dark and light forces of nature, were especially important. He valued the work of Fritz Lieber Jr., Theodore Sturgeon, Leigh Brackett, Edmond Hamilton, and such Jack Williamson novels as *Darker Than You Think* and *The Humanoids*. As I noted in responding to an earlier question, Tony Boucher and other astute critics viewed Ray as a writer who did the most to bring SF into the literary mainstream, but who never really wrote SF at all. The genre plots he drew from science fiction were simply armatures for writing about the human heart. He inspired many of today's writers, including Greg Bear.

**SFBC Member:** **"The Martian Chronicles" was published almost 70 years ago (yikes!); like so many other classic Martian sci-fi novels, it was written long before humans knew much about the planet, before probes, landers, and rovers were sent. Do you think contemporary works set on Mars by writers such as KSR, Bear, Weir, et al, which are more scientifically accurate have lost some of the romanticism and wonder of the earlier novels like "Chronicles"?**

**Eller:** Bradbury certainly drew on the romance tradition of Burroughs and others, but his focus always remained on how humans would respond to the wonder of new worlds, the danger, the isolation and loneliness, and the ever-present temptation to do to new worlds what we have done to our world. In that sense, there is continuity from Bradbury to Bear and the other writers who have inherited Bradbury's dreams and aspirations. The sense of wonder, the notion of sacrifice, the challenge of encountering Otherness—the romantic fundamentals of Bradbury's mid-century Martian tales—remain as well in the work of his successors.

**Ed Newsom:** **Did Waukegan's famous sons, Ray Bradbury and Jack Benny, ever meet?**

**Eller:** Yes, we have a Los Angeles newspaper photo of Ray with Jack Benny at a Los Angeles chamber symphony event in the early 1970s, I believe (both were supporters or on the board).

**John Grayshaw:** **I've read that Bradbury often revisited/tinkered with stories. You said he had a "pomegranate mind" in a 2017 article. Was he ever tempted to make *The Martian Chronicles* more cohesive or did he consider it to be like a short story collection? We were surprised when we read it as a group that some of the stories contradict each other.**

**Eller:** He pulled together stories of contact, settlement/exploitation, abandonment, and a final return to create the *Chronicles*. He had a rich base of such stories to choose from, and selected variations that offered the fewest contradictions. He pulled a bridge and a story ("The Fire Balloons") from the first American hardbound and paperback editions, but restored "The Fire balloons" in the English editions as he removed "Usher II," moving that story into the British edition of *The Illustrated Man*. Over time, he added "The Wilderness" to some editions, and eventually removed the historically dated story "Way in the Middle of the Air" from the Avon/Morrow texts. He also updated the prefix date range in that edition in 1997. If you look at the original pulp and mainstream magazine versions, you'll see that he re-wrote many of them to fit into the larger chronicle structure. I cover this in some detail in *Ray Bradbury:*

The Life of Fiction, and in the headnotes for Chronicles stories we have restored in The Collected Stories of Ray Bradbury, volumes 1-3.

**John Grayshaw: Ray Bradbury told Terry Gross in a 1986 interview about how he collected Buck Rogers comic strips in the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade, did he ever collect comic books too? If so which ones?**

**Eller:** He did not collect the early comic books that emerged in the late 1930s; however, he had been a dedicated collector of comic strips from the late 1920s until the mid-1930s. We have preserved more than twenty of his comic scrap books, where he pasted in (and sometimes colored in) long runs of strips, including Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, Tarzan, and Prince Valiant. Late in his career, Byron Priess developed newer comic adaptations of his stories, and he enjoyed having those as much as he enjoyed the early EC adaptations of the early 1950s. We have Ray's copies of the early ECs here in the Bradbury Center.

**John Grayshaw: Since Bradbury never learned how to drive how did he get around? Did his wife drive him everywhere?**

**Eller:** He traveled by streetcar (red line and green line, primarily) until the lines were discontinued. He used the bus system through the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1950s Maggie got her driver's license and drove various cars (including a T-Bird). Ray would ride his bicycle when he could, to the nearby studios and the office he maintained on Wilshire Boulevard for a time. When he worked under contract at MGM in 1960-61, he would bike downhill to the studio, and sometimes Maggie would pick him up for the return uphill ride home. He was prominent in the battle for a monorail system in LA, and worked with prominent politicians and architects on the concept without success. He would hire a car service in later decades, and often rode with friends as well.

**Gary Denton: Bradbury was a huge fan of education and libraries. I was curious if any of his estate went to some library or education project. "It's not going to do any good to land on Mars if we're stupid."**

**Eller:** He put decades of personal energy into supporting libraries all around southern California and elsewhere through lectures and library events. His lifetime of writing about libraries, and speaking about them, was the treasure he left to his readers and their librarians. We try to maintain social media and regional talks to support his abiding love of libraries, but his passing left a great empty place in our cultural reading heritage.

**John Grayshaw: What are some of the coolest things in your replica of Bradbury's office?**

**Eller:** Just look at our virtual tour of the Center for Ray Bradbury Studies, which includes a detailed look at our recreation of his office; you can even browse his bookshelves. The highlights include two of his desks from his home basement office, his worktable, and many of his awards and mementos. These include the Mars globe presented to Ray by NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, for his work in promoting and celebrating the Mariner 9 orbital mission of 1971. The Martian terrain in the globe comes from the Mariner 9 photo essays.



**John Grayshaw: what are some of the coolest things you've found in the 30,000 pages of Bradbury's incoming correspondence in your collection?**

**Eller:** One of three known letters to Ray from Walt Disney; letters from Hollywood directors John Huston and Steven Spielberg; a letter from First Lady Laura Bush; letters from a number of distinguished Hollywood actors; and hundreds (if not thousands) of letters from school children, teachers, librarians, and others who grew up reading Bradbury stories and novels. This list barely scratches the surface.

**John Grayshaw: Thank you so much for this interview.**