Guy Montag is a fireman who believes he is content in his job, however, his discontent, secret even from himself, becomes clear after he meets Clarisse McClellan, a teenage girl and his new neighbor, who engages in such outlandish behavior as walking instead of driving and having conversations. She asks him if he’s happy. When he returns home to find that his wife, Mildred, has taken a bottle full of sleeping pills, he realizes that he is not happy. Mildred is saved, but the next day she has no memory of her suicide attempt. She sits in the parlor, engrossed in its three full walls of interactive TV.

Back at the fire station, Montag is threatened by the Mecha hound, a robotic hound that can be programmed to track any scent. Captain Beatty tells him not to worry—unless, Beatty adds jokingly, Montag has a guilty conscience. For the next week, Montag continues to talk with Clarisse and to examine his own life. One day, while in the radio in the fire station mentions that war is imminent, Montag asks Beatty if there was a time when firemen prevented fires, instead of started them. The alarm rings, and the firemen all head to the house of an elderly man’s house, Montag tries to read and memorize passages of the Bible he’s brought with him. Faber is frightened of Montag. But reading is not easy when you have so little practice. Mildred soon gives up and insists that Montag get rid of the books so they can resume their lives. Montag, however, remembers a retired English professor named Faber whom he met a year ago and who might be able to help. On the subway trip to the man’s house, Montag tries to read and memorize passages of the Bible he’s brought with him. Faber is frightened of Montag at first, but eventually agrees to help Montag in a scheme to undermine the firemen. They agree to communicate through a tiny two-way radio placed in Montag’s ear. When Montag returns home, his wife’s friends are over watching TV. Montag loses his cool. He forces the women to listen to him read a poem by Matthew Arnold from one of his secret books. They leave, greatly upset. When Montag goes to work, Beatty mocks him with contradictory quotations drawn from famous books, which point out that books are useless, elitist, and confusing. Montag hands over a book to Beatty and is apparently forgiven. Suddenly, an alarm comes in. The firemen rush to their truck and head out to the address given. It’s Montag’s house. As they arrive, Mildred leaves the house and ducks into a taxi. She is the one who called in the alarm. Beatty forces Montag to burn his house with a flamethrower, and then tells him he’s under arrest. Beatty also discovers the two-way radio and says he’ll trace it to its source, then taunts Montag until Montag kills him with the flamethrower.

Now a fugitive and the object of a massive, televised manhunt, Montag visits Faber, then makes it to the river a few steps ahead of the Mechanical Hound. He floats downstream to safety. Along some abandoned railroad tracks in the countryside, Montag finds a group of old men whom Faber told him about—outcasts from society who were formerly academics and theologians. They and others like them have memorized thousands of books and are surviving on the margins of society, waiting for a time when the world becomes interested in reading again. Montag is able to remember parts of the Book of Ecclesiastes, so he has something to contribute.

Early the next morning, enemy bombers fly overhead toward the city. The war begins and ends almost in an instant. The city is reduced to powder. Montag mourns for Mildred and their empty life together. He is at last able to remember where they met—Chicago. With Montag leading, the group of men head upriver toward the city to help the survivors rebuild amid the ashes.

Guy Montag – A fireman and the book’s protagonist. As the novel opens, Montag takes pride in burning books and the homes of people who illegally own books. After meeting Clarisse McClellan, however, he begins to face his growing dissatisfaction with his life, his job, his marriage, and the pleasure-seeking, unthinking culture in which he lives. In fact, he has been secretly hoarding books, without actually reading them. After Clarisse’s death, he eventually begins to read the books. From that point on, there’s no turning back, and Montag begins to take action against his oppressive society.

Captain Beatty – Montag’s boss at the fire station. Beatty is a complex character. He has committed to memory many passages of classic literature, and can quote them at will, yet as a fire captain he is devoted to the destruction of intellectual pursuits, artistic efforts, and individual thought. Bradbury uses Beatty to explain how mid-20th-century America becomes the joy-seeking, irresponsible, unemotional, and intellectually repressive future world depicted in Fahrenheit 451. Beatty claims he, like Montag, once became interested in books, but he now endorses instant gratification. Yet Beatty uses his extensive learning to push Montag past the breaking point and goad Montag into killing him. After Montag kills Beatty, Montag becomes convinced that Beatty actually wanted to die (though it’s never clear if this is true). Beatty is an intellectual wearing the uniform of the intellectual’s worst enemy. Perhaps the contradiction is too much for him in the end.

Mildred Montag – Montag’s wife. She drowns her unhappiness with pills and a constant barrage of media, fast driving, and other mindless distractions. The day after attempting suicide she has no memory of the event. She and Montag have lost whatever connection they once had. Mildred is a hollow

Characters
person—she doesn’t seem to have a real connection to any- one. Instead, she’s devoted to her interactive TV shows. After Montag brings books home and reads poetry to her friends, she betrays him to the authorities, wanting to preserve her life of instant gratification and comfort.

Faber – A former English professor who describes himself as a coward because he did not act to try to change the direc- tion in which society was headed. He uses a two-way radio to direct Montag through situations in which he is too frightened – A former English professor who describes himself as a coward because he did not act to try to change the direction in which society was headed. He uses a two-way radio to direct Montag through situations in which he is too frightened to stop. They stopped reading books gradually over time as the culture around them grew faster, shallower, intellectually blander, and centered around minor thrills and instant gratifi- cation. In such a culture, books became shorter, magazine and newspaper articles became simpler, cartoon pictures and tele- vision became more prevalent, and entertainment replaced reflection and debate.

Another factor that contributes to the growth of censorship in Fahrenheit 451 is minorities and what we might call “special interest groups.” In order not to offend every imaginable group and sub-group—whether organized around ethnicity, religion, profession, geography, or affinity—every trace of controversy slowly vanished from public discourse, and magazines became “a nice blend of vanilla tapioca.”

In time, the word “intellectual” became a swear word, and books came to be seen as a dangerous means for one person to lord his or her knowledge and learning over someone else. Books, and the critical thinking they encouraged, became seen as a direct threat to equality. By making widespread censorship a phenomenon that emerges from the culture itself—and not one that is simply imposed from above by the government—Bradbury is expressing a concern that the power of mass media can ultimately suppress free speech as thoroughly as any totalitarian regime.

Symbols

Symbols are shown in red text when they appear in the Plot Summary and Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

**Fire**

Fire is an interesting symbol in Fahrenheit 451 because it symbolizes two different things. Through the firemen, who burn books and wear the number “451” on their helmets, fire symbolizes destruction. (451°F is the temperature at which paper and books burn.) Yet at the same time, Clarisse reminds Montag of candle-light, and so fire, when controlled, symbolizes the flickering of self-awareness and knowledge.

**The Phoenix**

The myths of many Mediterranean cultures include the story of the phoenix, a bird that is consumed by flames but then rises from the ashes. The phoenix is a symbol for renewal, for life that follows death in a cleansing fire. After the city is reduced to ashes by bombings in Fahrenheit 451, Granger makes a direct comparison between human beings and the story of the phoenix. Both destroy themselves in fire. Both start again amid the ashes. If people keep books—which preserve the past and allow people to learn the lessons of prior tragedies—Granger hopes that humanity will remember the suffering caused by destruction, and will avoid destroying itself in the future.

**The Sieve and the Sand**

“The Sieve and the Sand” is the title of the second section of Fahrenheit 451. The title refers to Montag’s childhood memory of trying to fill a sieve with sand. He’s reminded of this event when he’s asked to read the Bible on the subway. While he’s trying to memorize what he’s reading, an announcement for toothpaste keeps derail- ing him. To Montag, the sand rep- resents the knowledge that he seeks—something of material importance—and the sieve represents his mind trying to grasp and retain this knowledge.

**The Hearer and the Salamander**

“The Hearer and the Salamander” is the title of the first section of Fahrenheit 451. Both hearths and salamanders are associ- ated with fire. Hearths (fireplaces) are traditionally the center of the home and the source of warmth. The firemen wear salamander imagery on their uniforms and call their fire truck a “salamander” because salamanders were once believed to live in fire without being consumed by it.

**The Hearth and the Salamander**

Throughout the novel, Bradbury portrays mass media as the constant motion and titillation is designed to help people suppress their sadness and avoid any kind of intense emotion or difficult thoughts and experiences. The people of Fahrenheit 451 have to come to equate this motion, fun, and distraction with happiness.

However, Fahrenheit 451 makes the case that engaging with difficult and uncomfortable thoughts and experiences is the only routes to true happiness. Only by being uncomfort- able, or experiencing things that are new or awkward, can people achieve a real and meaningful engagement with the world and each other. The people in the novel who lack such engagement, such as Mildred, feel a profound despair, which in turn makes them more determined to distract themselves by watching more TV, overdosing on sleeping pills, or letting tech- nicians use a specialized machine to suck away their sadness. The result is a vicious cycle, in which people are terrified to expose themselves to any kind of emotion or difficulty because doing so will force them to face their pent-up despair, though in reality it’s their avoidance of those thoughts and feelings that creates their despair. Only after he acknowledges his own unhappiness can Montag make the life-changing decision to find Faber and resist his society’s oppressive “happiness” and thought-suppression that he, as a fireman, once enforced.

**Mass Media**

Much of Fahrenheit 451 is devoted to depicting a future United States society bombarded with messages and imagery by an omnipresent mass media. Instead of the small black-and-white TV screens common in American households in 1953 (the year of the book’s publication), the characters in the novel live their lives in rooms with entire walls that act as televisions. These TVs show serial dramas in which the viewer’s name is woven into the program and the viewer is able to interact with fictional characters called “the relatives” or “the family.” Scenes change rapidly, images flash quickly in bright colors, all of it designed to produce distraction and fascination. When not in their inter- active TV rooms, many characters, including Guy Montag’s wife Mildred, spend much of their time with “Seashell ear thimbles” in their ears—miniature radio receivers that play constant broadcasts of news, advertisements, and music, drowning out the real sounds of the world.

Throughout the novel, Bradbury portrays mass media as a veil that obscures real experience and interferes with the characters’ ability to think deeply about their lives and societal issues. Bradbury isn’t suggesting that media other than books couldn’t be enriching and fulfilling. As Faber tells Montag, “It isn’t books you need, it’s some of the things that once were in books....The same infinite detail and awareness could be projected through the radios and televisions, but are not.” In an interview marking the fiftieth anniversary of the novel’s pub- lication, Bradbury indicated that some of his fears about mass media had been realized. “We bombarded people with sensations,” he said, “that substitutes for thinking.”

**Conformity vs. Individuality**

Pleasure-seeking and distraction are the hallmarks of the culture in which Montag lives. Although these may sound like a very self-serving set of values, the culture is not one that celebrates or even tolerates a broad range of self-expression. Hedonism and mindless entertainment are the norm, and so long as the people in the society of Fahrenheit 451 stick to movies and sports and racing their cars, pursuits that require little individual thought, they’re left alone by society.

However, whenever individuals start to question the pur- pose of such a life, and begin to look for answers in books or the natural world and express misgivings, they become threats. Their questions and actions might cause others to face the difficult questions that their culture is designed to distract them from. For that reason, in the society of Fahrenheit 451 people who express their individuality find themselves social outcasts at best, and at worst in real danger.

Clarisse McClellan represents free thought and indi- viduality. She’s unlike anyone else Montag knows. She has little interest in the thrill-seeking of her peers. She’d rather talk, ob- serve the natural world firsthand, and ask questions. She soon

**Censorship**

Books are banned in the society depicted in Fahrenheit 451. When they’re found, they’re burned, along with the homes of the books’ owners. But it’s important to remember that in the world of this novel, the suppression of books began as self- censorship. As Beatty explains to Montag, people didn’t stop reading books because a tyrannical government forced them

**Themes**

Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the Summary and Analysis sections.
- Use the ThemeTracker section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

**Distriction vs. Happiness**

Why has the society of Fahrenheit 451 become so shallow, indifferent, and conforming? Why do people drive so fast, keep Seashell ear thimbles in their ears, and spend all day in front of room-sized, four-walled TV programs? According to Beatty, the constant motion and titillation is designed to help people suppress their sadness and avoid any kind of intense emotion or difficult thoughts and experiences. The people of Fahrenheit 451 have to come to equate this motion, fun, and distraction with happiness.

However, Fahrenheit 451 makes the case that engaging with difficult and uncomfortable thoughts and experiences is the only routes to true happiness. Only by being uncomfort- able, or experiencing things that are new or awkward, can people achieve a real and meaningful engagement with the world and each other. The people in the novel who lack such engagement, such as Mildred, feel a profound despair, which in turn makes them more determined to distract themselves by watching more TV, overdosing on sleeping pills, or letting tech- nicians use a specialized machine to suck away their sadness. The result is a vicious cycle, in which people are terrified to expose themselves to any kind of emotion or difficulty because doing so will force them to face their pent-up despair, though in reality it’s their avoidance of those thoughts and feelings that creates their despair. Only after he acknowledges his own unhappiness can Montag make the life-changing decision to find Faber and resist his society’s oppressive “happiness” and thought-suppression that he, as a fireman, once enforced.

**Action vs. Inaction**

In the years up to and before World War II, many societies, including Germany, became dangerous and intolerant. Even so, their citizens were afraid to speak out against these changes. Fahrenheit 451 was published in 1953, just a few years after WWII ended, and is very concerned with the idea of taking ac- tion versus standing by while society falters. In particular, the novel shows how Montag learns to take action, in contrast to Faber who is too cowardly to act. At the same time, Faber does help teach Montag the difference between reckless and intelligent action, so that by the end of the novel Montag is ready to act in a constructive rather than destructive way.

**Symbols**

Symbols are shown in red text when they appear in the Plot Summary and Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

**Fire**

Fire is an interesting symbol in Fahrenheit 451 because it symbolizes two different things. Through the firemen, who burn books and wear the number “451” on their helmets, fire symbolizes destruction. (451°F is the temperature at which paper and books burn.) Yet at the same time, Clarisse reminds Montag of candle-light, and so fire, when controlled, symbolizes the flickering of self-awareness and knowledge.
As the novel begins, Guy Montag is taking an intense pleasure in burning a pile of books on a lawn. It’s his job—he’s a fireman. He loves the way things look when they burn and the way he feels when he burns them. When he’s done, he returns to the fire station, changes out of his equipment (including his helmet with the number 451 on it), and takes the subway to his stop. As he walks home, Montag encounters a teenage girl standing alone. She introduces herself as Clarisse McClellan, a new neighbor, and asks if she can walk home with him. She notes that Montag is a fireman, and says that she isn’t afraid of him and tells him that fireman used to put out fires rather than start them. Montag finds Clarisse fascinating, but she also makes him nervous. For some reason she reminds him of an early memory of candlelight.

Clarisse says that in her family people actually walk places, in contrast to people in their jet cars who don’t know what the world looks like. She says that she doesn’t take part in the entertainments that her peers do. When she tells him that there’s dew on the grass in the morning, Montag suddenly isn’t sure if he knew that. When they reach Clarisse’s house, all the lights are on because her family is still up talking. She asks Montag if he’s happy, then runs up talking. She asks Montag if he’s happy, then runs inside before he can answer.

Montag enters his own house, troubled by Clarisse’s parting question. Of course he’s happy. But the image of Clarisse’s face stays with him, reminding him of doubts he keeps in a hidden place within him—his “innermost trembling thought.”

Upon entering the cold, dark silence of his bedroom, Montag enters his own house, troubled by Clarisse’s parting question. Of course he’s happy. But the image of Clarisse’s face stays with him, reminding him of doubts he keeps in a hidden place within him—his “innermost trembling thought.”

The opening plunges you into the different world of the novel. The job of the fireman is the opposite of what we expect—firemen set fires. Montag, the protagonist, likes his job. He seems happy, and he doesn’t appear to think there’s anything wrong with burning books.

Clarisse McClellan is a fireman, and says that she isn’t afraid of him and tells him that fireman used to put out fires rather than start them. Montag finds Clarisse fascinating, but she also makes him nervous. For some reason she reminds him of an early memory of candlelight.

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Clarisse tells Montag that she thinks it’s strange that he’s a fireman, since other firemen won’t talk to her or listen to her. Clarisse’s comment makes Montag feel as if he’s split in half. But rather than saying anything, he sends her on her way to see her psychiatrist. The authorities make her see the psychologist because of her tendency toward independent thought.

After Clarisse leaves, Montag opens his mouth to taste the raindrops while he walks to work. At the fire station, Montag looks in on the “sleeping” Mechanical Hound, a robotic creature that can be programmed to track the scent of an animal (or person), which it then kills with an injection of morphine or procaine. To entertain themselves, the firemen sometimes program the hound and let rats loose in the firehouse and watch the hunt. Montag doesn’t usually participate. Now, when Montag touches the Hound’s muzzle, it makes a growling noise, shows its needle, and moves towards him. Shaken, Montag escapes to the second floor.

Upstairs, four firemen are playing cards. Montag complains to Captain Beatty (whose helmet has a phoenix on it) about the Hound’s threatening gestures toward him. The Captain says the Hound doesn’t like or dislike, it just does what it’s programmed to do. Montag wonders if someone has hidden the Hound with its chemical fingerprint. The Captain dismisses this but says they’ll have the Hound checked out. Montag thinks about something he has hidden behind the ventilator grille at home. Out loud, he opens his mouth to think about whether he was a dammit—whether he was afraid of being alone. He’s afraid of being alone.

The next morning, Mildred has no memory of the previous night and denies taking the pills. Later, when Montag gets ready for work, Mildred is in the TV parlor preparing to watch a TV show that lets her participate. The TV fills up three full walls. Mildred complains that they don’t have a fourth wall yet. Montag makes sure the TV program has a happy ending before leaving for work.

On his way to work, Montag meets Clarisse again. She is walking in the rain, tasting the raindrops and holding dandelions. She applies a childish dandelion test (rubbing the flower on his chin) to see if Montag is in love—her test shows that he isn’t in love with anyone. Montag is upset and insists that he is in love.

Clarisse tells Montag that she thinks it’s strange that he’s a fireman, since other firemen won’t talk to her or listen to her. Clarisse’s comment makes Montag feel as if he’s split in half. But rather than saying anything, he sends her on her way to see her psychiatrist. The authorities make her see the psychologist because of her tendency toward independent thought.

Mildred drowns her unhappiness in a constant media blitz. She keeps radio earphones in her ears and spends day and night captivated and superficially content, surrounded by an interactive, three-wall TV. In doing so she conforms perfectly to the society around her.

Clarisse earlier forced Montag to think about a big question he’d avoided—whether he was happy—now she forces him to think about whether he’s actually in love. Tasting raindrops is a perfect metaphor for interacting with the natural world.

Clarisse now also forces Montag to face his own individuality by making him see that he’s not a typical fireman. But Montag isn’t yet ready to say or do anything about it. Notice how the authorities try to control even unconventional people like Clarisse.

Montag has been affected by Clarisse, though.

The Mechanical Hound is one of the more chilling parts of the world of Fahrenheit 451. It’s one of the firemen’s terrible weapons, but it’s supposed to be without personality or motive—a machine that attacks only what it is programmed to attack. Yet the Mechanical Hound threatens Montag. Maybe he has something to hide? Bradbury is foreshadowing later events here.

Captain Beatty is Montag’s boss. Outwardly he reassures Montag, yet there’s a quiet but distinct undertone of dread to what he says. When Beatty stays at Montag, it’s almost as if Beatty can sense what Montag is thinking about. Beatty’s phoenician insignia symbolizes rebirth through fire—but the renewed world promised by the firemen is one without books. This image of a phoenix will be contrasted with another image of a phoenix at the end of the novel.

Bradbury uses the character of Clarisse to describe how mass media culture has affected the youth in Fahrenheit 451. Clarisse’s peers have no respect for their elders and don’t seem to value their own lives. They seek out cheap thrills and distraction, they speed around in their cars and crash, they shoot each other, and they break things. Their education consists of learning answers without asking questions. In contrast, instead of searching out cheap thrills, Clarisse does what she can to try to understand and engage with other people.
Over the same seven-day period, Montag works at the firehouse, sometimes entering through the back door. Someone mentions that a fireman in Seattle committed suicide by setting the Mechanical Hound to his own chemical fingerprint. And then, one day, Clarisse is not there to walk him to the subway when he goes to work.

At the station that day, Montag and the firemen play cards as the radio in the background reports that war may be declared at any moment. Montag, meanwhile, feels that Beatty can sense his guilt. He says he’s been thinking about the man whose library they burned last week—thinking about what it would be like to have firemen in their own homes. With a knowing tone, Beatty asks whether Montag has any books. Montag says no.

Montag asks if there once was a time when firemen prevented fires, rather than setting them. The other firemen scoff at this and take out their rule books, which state the history of the Firemen of America (established in the 18th century to burn books of British influence in the Colonies) and the basic rules of being a fireman—answer the alarm, burn everything, return to the fire station. They all stare at Montag. Suddenly, the fire alarm goes off.

The firemen arrive at the house of an old woman whose neighbors reported her for having books. The firemen ransack the house, pile up the books, and pump kerosene into the rooms. While they work, Montag grabs a book and instinctively hides it in his clothing. The woman refuses to leave the building. Montag desperately tries to lead her out, but she won’t leave her porch. Kerosene fumes are rising from the house, sometimes entering through the back window. The woman remains in the house as the firemen ransack her, but she won’t leave. Montag feels like he’s lost her to high-speed speeding up in the 20th century, the world getting more crowded, and people having less time. Books were condensed to digest and tabloid and 15-minute radio shows. Information was delivered faster and faster, in briefer and briefer packages, with an emphasis on instant gratification. Education was simplified and shortened. Entertainment was everywhere.

Another factor in the dumbing down of culture, according to Beatty, were the demands made by every imaginable minority group (geographical, ethnic, occupational, religious, and so on). Montag’s guilt about his family for some time because of their odd and inferior. The job then fell to firemen to become the weapons used to make some people feel inferior. Montag hid behind his pillow. When she tries to point out the book to Beatty, Montag snaps at her to sit down. Beatty notices the exchange, but doesn’t point out the book to Beatty, Montag snaps at her to sit down. Beatty notices the exchange, but Montag hides it, and Mildred isn’t ever able to explain what the secret subjects are. It seems split in two during this period. On his walks with Clarisse he is his real self, at ease, talking, and listening. At the firehouse, the Hound preys on his peace of mind.

Although Montag’s guilty secret hasn’t yet been disclosed to the reader, it seems more and more likely that the secret involves books. Montag’s guilt about burning the man’s books also indicate that he’s starting to rethink whether he really should be a fireman—he’s starting to think for himself.

In this future America, people are taught an alternate history that connects burning books to the patriotic acts of American independence—the first burned books were British-influenced books. But Montag’s questions are starting to make him stand out from the others who merely accept this history without questioning it.

The woman knows what will happen to her, and she remains in the house. Unlike everyone else in this society, she has something to live and die for—books. By taking a book and hiding it, Montag signals that he may have his own secrets about books...

By choosing to burn herself rather than simply accept the burning of her books, the old woman becomes a martyr for books and the intellectual freedom they represent. Rather than letting the firemen burn her, she takes action and kills herself first.

The woman chooses an appropriate quotation for her death. She is trying to make up for the facts of her own life. Montag suffers from this same affliction, but he at least tries to remember. Mildred doesn’t try—she escapes her sad thoughts by taking pills.

As Beatty talks, Mildred starts straightening up the house. She soon discovers the book that Montag hid behind his pillow. When she tries to point out the book to Beatty, Montag snaps at her to sit down. Beatty notices the exchange, but continues speaking as if he hadn’t noticed.

Beatty says the word “intellectual” became a swear word. No one wanted to feel less intelligent than anyone else—everyone wanted to be equal. Books were like weapons used to make people feel inferior. The job then fell to firemen to become the “official censors, judges, and executors” and to enforce the ban on books. Beatty comments that, after all, people just want to be happy, and this culture provides pleasure.

Montag asks about Clarisse, and Beatty reveals that he’d been keeping an eye on the McClellan family for some time because of their odd and independent behavior, adding that it’s for the best that Clarisse is dead.

Before leaving, Beatty mentions that every fireman eventually feels the urge to read a book. Montag asks what would happen to a fireman who accidentally took a book home. Beatty says the fireman could keep the book for 24 hours, but then would have to burn it, or else the rest of the firemen would burn along with her books. Montag also describes his guilt over all the books he’s destroyed. Mildred refuses to have a real discussion about it. The painful exchange is interrupted when Captain Beatty unexpectedly arrives.

The next morning, Montag feels ill and vomits. He’s late for work and considers calling in sick. He tells Mildred that he’s haunted by the woman that the firemen burned along with her books. Montag also describes his guilt over all the books he’s destroyed. Mildred refuses to have a real discussion about it. The painful exchange is interrupted when Captain Beatty unexpectedly arrives.

Montag’s guilt about the woman’s death has made him physically unwell and has caused him to question his job as a fireman. The old woman succeeded in lighting a candle in his mind that won’t go out. Mildred, as always, refuses to engage in any deep conversation.

Beatty’s knowledge of the subject implies that he at one time shared Montag’s concerns and researched the subject, even if he ultimately chose to remain a fireman. Incidentally, Beatty’s critical descriptions of omnipresent entertainment and media distractions, dumbed-down news coverage, condensed literature, and shortened attention spans—all envisioned by Bradbury midway through the 20th century—look like fairly accurate predictions of early 21st-century society.

Beatty describes how a society comes to value and impose conformity on itself out of an innocent desire to avoid offending anyone. But being a free individual among other free individuals requires a willingness to offend and be offended. Bradbury again predicts the future in remarkable accuracy—though the term “political correctness” didn’t exist when Bradbury wrote this novel, modern critiques of political correctness as censorship often echo Beatty’s account.

Beatty’s willingness to overlook the book that Montag has taken suggests again that Beatty has been where Montag is now and is willing to let Montag work it out for himself....
Montag tells Mildred he never wants to work as a fireman again, and shows her a secret he’s been keeping behind the vent, a printer. Mildred becomes hysterical and tries to burn them, but he stops her. He says that they’re both emotional messes, whether she admits it or not, and says that maybe there’s something in the books that can help. She’s reluctant, but he convinces her that they should give themselves 48 hours to look at the books, and if what Captain Beatty says is true—books are meaningless—then they’ll burn the books together. Montag wants to understand why someone like Beatty would be afraid of someone like Clarisse. Montag and Mildred sit on the floor and start reading.

Part Two: The Sieve and the Sand

Montag and Mildred spend the afternoon flipping through books, reading passages, and trying to make sense of what they read. Mildred doesn’t see the point of it. She would rather be in the parlor with her TV “family” and is also nervous about what Captain Beatty would do if he found the books. Montag is more worried about Mildred’s depression, Clarisse’s disappearance, and the bombers he hears flying overhead. He says that their country has started and won two atomic wars since 1990, yet no one talks about the rest of the world, which supposedly hates their country and is starving. He doesn’t understand it, but he hopes the books might help.

Montag remembers a retired English professor he met in the park a year ago. The man, Faber, was fearful of Montag at first, but after Montag assured Faber that he was safe and the two of talked for a while, Faber felt secure enough to recite poetry. The man made an impression on Montag—he was less interested in things than in the meaning of things. At the end of their talk, Faber gave Montag his phone number. Now Montag decides to call Faber for help. On the phone, Montag asks how many copies exist of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Plato. Faber, frightened and thinking this is some sort of trick, says there are none and hangs up.

Montag shows Mildred the book he took from the old woman’s house; it’s a Bible, maybe the last Bible in existence. Mildred tells him to hand it in to Captain Beatty, but if it really is the last Bible Montag doesn’t want to destroy it. He would rather hand in a substitute book. Montag then realizes that if Beatty knows that he took the Bible, by handing in a substitute book. Montag realizes that he’ll have to get a replica of the Bible made.

Mildred yells at Montag that he’s ruining them. Soon, however, she calms down and tells him that her friends are coming over to watch a show called The White Clown. Montag, hoping to get through to her, asks her, Does the White Clown love her? Does her TV “family” love her? She says it’s a silly question. He leaves, dejected, and heads for the subway to go to Faber’s house.

Montag feels numb. He remembers a time as a child at the beach when he tried, unsuccessfully, to fill a sieve with sand. Now he realizes he’s holding the Bible open on his lap. If he can read the text in front of him and memorize it, he thinks that he can keep some of the sand in the sieve. He tries to read a passage but he’s distracted by an advertisement for toothpaste. He stands up, screams for the advertisement to shut up, and waves the Bible, alarming the other passengers, before he gets off.

This is the emotional climax of the first part of the book. Montag is at last voicing his fears about his relationship with Mildred, as well as his curiosity and hope about the books he’s been hoarding without reading. He has a creeping suspicion that what the firemen stand for is wrong, while what Clarisse represents is right. He’s ready to try to engage intellectually with other people’s ideas and ways of looking at the world. He starts to read.

In his confusion and despair, Montag places his hopes in books. But he has no practice reading or understanding complicated ideas or arguments, so understanding what he reads is a real struggle. Mildred tries to read along with Montag, but she’s addicted to the easy familiarity of watching TV, and is afraid of the authorities who enforce the ban on books.

Montag doesn’t think he can get what he needs from books on his own, since he has no practice reading. Contrast the difficulty of reading and understanding books with the easiness of watching TV, which anyone can watch and understand immediately. But Faber, conditioned by years of violently enforced censorship, is too fearful to offer help.

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Like the old woman in the house, Montag is now willing to put himself in danger for the sake of preserving books. He has taken a stance against his society, though at this point he is not in outright rebellion, but he is trying to protect the Bible while also protecting himself.

Mildred can’t maintain feelings of anger for any length of time—like everyone else, she’s too busy being excited about the next TV show! Unlike Montag, who engaged with Clarisse’s question about love, Mildred dismisses her question as silly to avoid thinking about it.

The sand falling through the sieve is a metaphor for knowledge in this society in general, and for Montag’s effort to get and keep knowledge in particular. Montag no longer accepts the basic values of his society, and until he can find some other values to take their place, he is lost.

Faber is frightened when Montag shows up at his house, but is reassured when Montag shows him the Bible. Faber describes himself as a coward because he didn’t speak up long ago when he saw the way society was changing. He then asks Montag to tell him why he’s come.

Montag says that something is missing from people’s lives, and books are the only things he knows for sure are missing. So, maybe books are the answer. Faber responds that it’s not the books that are missing, it’s what’s in the books—and could also be on radio and television, but isn’t.

Faber says three things are missing from people’s lives. The first is quality information that has a detailed and “textured” understanding of life. As a parable, Faber mentions the story of Hercules and Antaeus, a giant wrestler who was invincible so long has he stood firmly on the earth, but whom Hercules defeated after lifting him off the ground. The he agrees when Montag relays Mildred’s contention that TV seems more real than books, but he responds that he prefers books because television is too fast and controlling—you can’t stop watching or you will miss what’s happening. With books, in contrast, you can put them down and consider them to digest what they say before reading on.

The second missing thing in people’s lives is leisure time. Leisure time doesn’t mean hours spent speeding in cars or sitting in front of four-wall TV shows. Instead, it means the leisure of silence and having the space in one’s life to examine and digest one’s reading and experience.

Faber’s third requirement is the freedom for people to act based on what they learn when they have access to both quality information and the peace of mind to think it through.

Montag wants to do something, but Faber is reluctant to act. Faber does hypothetically suggest a scheme of printing books and planting them in the firehouses to discredit the firemen. Montag jumps at the idea, but as a bomber flies overhead, Faber says that the firemen are actually just a symptom because the populace doesn’t want to read anyway. Faber says that they’d be better off just waiting for the coming war to destroy the current civilization.

Unwilling not to act, Montag rips a page out of the Bible, then another, until Faber’s agrees to help. Faber promises to get in touch with an old friend of his who owns a printing press. He also agrees to help Montag deal with Captain Beatty and give Beatty a substitute book instead of the Bible. Faber gives Montag a tiny two-way radio transmitter he’s built that can fit in someone’s ear. The device will allow Faber to hear whatever Montag hears and to talk Montag through difficult situations.

As Montag takes the subway home, Faber reads to him from the Bible while pleasant announcements that the country has mobilized for war play over the radio.

Faber believes in books and knowledge, but as of now he does not have the courage to stand up for them. Unlike Mildred, who conforms because she is addicted to distraction, Faber conforms out of fear.

Faber’s point here is that it’s knowledge and deep thought that are important, not what contains the knowledge and thought.

Faber’s mention of the parable of Hercules and Antaeus suggests that mass media has lost its connection to real life by leaving out thought and knowledge. In turn, it provides no strength to those who consume it. While Faber believes that any form of media can contain the type of information he prizes in books, he thinks that the effort required to read books makes them the best suited type of media for disseminating rich and complicated ideas.

There is plenty of leisure time in the society of Fahrenheit 451, but it is consumed by noise, images, speed, and explosions. No one really processes what they see or hear or feel.

This is a reminder that the threat of physical violence hovers over people like Faber and now Montag.

The weight of seeing his civilization decay and of his feelings of cowardice have left Faber almost unwilling to act. He can’t face risking anything for what seems like a losing cause. Nevertheless, Montag’s appearance at his home gives him a tiny spark of hope.

Montag is worried that Captain Beatty will talk him out of the resolve he now feels. The Captain has a way with words, but so does Faber, and with Faber’s help, Montag may learn and grow stronger. Faber and Beatty are set up as opposites.

The contrast between Montag and Faber’s reading of the Bible and the casual broadcasts about the warbig shows the superficiality of this society.
At home, Mildred’s friends Mrs. Phelps and Mrs. Bowles arrive to watch the White Clown. Faber, through Montag’s earpiece, tells him not to do anything and to be patient, but Montag pulls the plug on the TV show and tries to talk with them. The women have no concern about the coming war—Mrs. Phelps says that if her husband, who’s serving in the Army, is killed then she’ll just marry again. Montag orders them to destr...
Granger says that he himself is Plato’s Republic and another man at the campfire is Marcus Aurelius’s work. He introduces the men by the authors they have memorized. Granger explains that they all memorized books and then burned them, because keeping the books was too dangerous.

Granger explains that thousands of people across the country have memorized books and are lying low, waiting for the war. Once it’s over, they hope people might be willing to listen to them. If not, they’ll pass the books to a next generation until the people of the cities are ready. Granger wants Montag to understand that they must not feel superior to other people. They consider themselves “dust jackets for books, of no significance otherwise.” Someday they’ll recite the books they remember so the text can be written down again. The men put out the fire and move downstream.

As they move downstream, Montag looks at the faces of the men, trying to find a sign of their inner resolve and of the great stores of knowledge within their heads. But the men just look old and uncertain if their efforts will be of great consequence to the world. One of the men jokes that Montag shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, and they all laugh.

Montag’s limited but passionate attempts at reading have paid off—he has something to contribute to the effort. Granger describes Montag as a copy of the Book of Ecclesiastes, implying that his knowledge of the book is his main importance.

By identifying themselves by the works they’ve memorized, the men show that their knowledge is more important than their identities. In other words, it’s not the medium but the message that matters.

Humankind has returned to an oral tradition of literature, as in the time of Homer, when long works of poetry were memorized and recited. In a sense, these men are waiting for society to be reborn, to rise from its own ashes until it is safe again to write down works of literature.

The men know that their effort and sacrifice don’t guarantee success, but they have given themselves to the cause of preserving knowledge and that gives them an identity.

Suddenly, jets scream overhead on the way to the city. Montag thinks of Mildred, and tells the other men that something must be wrong with him because he doesn’t think he’ll feel bad if she dies. He can barely even remember her. Granger tries to comfort Montag by telling him about his own late grandfather, a sculptor. Granger believes that people are remembered when they touch the world with thought and care and, in doing so, change it, even if in very small ways.

The war ends almost instantly: the jets drop their bombs and the city is annihilated. The shockwave from the explosion knocks the men down. As he huddles against the ground, Montag thinks of Clarisse, already dead, Faber, on a bus to another annihilated city, and Mildred, whom he imagines in horrifying detail in a hotel room at the moment of detonation. Suddenly he remembers where he and Mildred met, in Chicago.

Montag then remembers passages from the Book of Ecclesiastes and recites them to himself. Once the aftershock of the bombs passes, the men eat breakfast. Granger relates the story of the phoenix, a mythical bird that built a pyre and burned itself every few hundred years and then was born again. “He must have been first cousin to Man,” Granger says.

Granger says their job is to remember. The first thing they should do, he says, is to build a mirror factory so that everyone can take a long look at themselves. With Montag leading the way, the men head upriver to help the survivors and the destroyed city rise up again from the ashes.

The phoenix, with its connection to fire, appears throughout the book. On Beatty’s helmet, it symbolized fire’s destructive power. Now, though, it symbolized rebirth from war and from the nightmare mass media society that had taken over the United States.

Granger implies that the value of the literature they’ve memorized is that it forces people to recognize and think about themselves—in doing so, it provides the self-knowledge and wisdom needed to rebuild.

Here Granger clearly expresses the idea of the importance of individual engagement with the world. Someone who conforms and does not think or act for themselves, such as Mildred, leaves no trace of themselves because they don’t affect the world. But those who act as individuals, as Montag has started to do, change the world, even if just a bit.

Faber described the mass media as having lost touch with reality, just as Hercules lifted Antaeus from the ground. Now, as the city and that mass media society is destroyed, Montag huddles against the ground. In the process, he reconnects with his past and remembers where he met Mildred.

Important Quotes

**Part 1 Quotes**

It was a pleasure to burn.

“Are you happy?” — Clarisse McClellan

“You’re not like the others. I’ve seen a few; I know. When I talk, you look at me. When I said something about the moon, you looked at the moon, last night. The others would never do that.” — Clarisse McClellan

The Mechanical Hound slept but did not sleep, lived but did not in its gently humming, gently vibrating, softly illuminated kennel back in a dark corner of the firehouse.

“I’m antisocial, they say. I don’t mix. It’s so strange. I’m very alone with myself. I don’t get out of here. I’m very... I don’t even touch the flag, even if in very small ways.” — Old Woman

The woman on the porch reached out with contempt to them all and struck the kitchen match against the railing.

“Speed up the film, Montag, quick… Uhh! Bang! Smack! Wall-lap, Bing, Bong, Boom! Digest-digests, digest-digest-digests. Politics? One column, two sentences, a headline… Whirl man’s mind around about so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought!” — Captain Beatty

“Bigger the population, the more minorities. Don’t step on the toes of the dog lovers, the cat lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico. The

**Part 2 Quotes**

“We have everything we need to be happy, but we aren’t happy. Something’s missing. I looked around. The only thing I positively knew was gone was the books. I’d burned in ten or twelve years. So I thought books might help.” — Montag

“It’s not books you need, it’s some of the things that once were books…The same infinite detail and awareness could be projected through radios and televisions, but are not.” — Faber

“We are living in a time when flowers are trying to live on flow- ers, instead of growing on good rain and black loam.” — Faber

“Those who don’t build must burn. It’s as old as history and juvenile delinquents.” — Faber

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.

“They are so confident that they will run on forever. But they won’t run on. They don’t know that this is all one huge blazing meteor that makes a pretty fire in space, but that someday it’ll have to hit.” — Faber

**Part 3 Quotes**

“What is it about fire that’s so lovely? No matter what age we are, what draws us to it?… It’s perpetual motion; the thing man wanted to invent but never did. Or almost perpetual motion. If you let it go on, it’d burn our lifetimes out.” — Beatty

“Now, Montag, you’re a burden. And fire will lift you off my shoulders, clean, quick, sure; nothing to rot later. Antibiotic, aesthetic, practical.” — Beatty

The sun burnt every day. It burnt Time… Time was busy burn- ing the years and the people anyway, without any help from him. So if he burnt things with the firemen and the sun burnt Time, that meant that everything burnt!

“We’re nothing more than dust jackets for books, of no signifi- cance otherwise.” — Granger

“…We’re going to build a mirror factory first and put out nothing but mirrors for the next year and take a long look in them.” — Granger
On his way home from a day’s work of burning books, fireman Guy Montag meets his new neighbor, Clarisse McClellan.

Clarisse asks Montag if he’s happy.

In their bedroom, Montag finds his wife, Mildred. She’s taken dozens of sleeping pills. Technicians come to pump her stomach and use a machine to suck away her sadness.

Mildred spends the next day watching full-wall TV in the parlor. Montag sees and talks to Clarisse again.

At the fire station, the Mechanical Hound threatens Montag. Captain Beatty tells him not to worry.

For the next week, Montag sees Clarisse on his way to and from work. They talk openly about all kinds of things.

The radio at the fire station reports that war may be declared. Montag asks Beatty whether firemen used to prevent fires, not start them.

The firemen go to burn the books and house of an old woman. The woman burns herself along with the house. Montag takes a Bible from her house.

In bed, Montag asks Mildred where they met. Neither can remember.

Mildred tells Montag that Clarisse has been killed.

Montag feels sick and doesn’t go to work.

Captain Beatty comes to Montag’s house. He explains the history of censorship, mass media, and firemen.

Beatty says it’s okay for a fireman to keep a book for 24 hours out of curiosity, as long as he then turns it in.

Mildred freaks out when Montag shows her the twenty books he’s been hiding in the house. They try to read the books.

The attempt to read the books is unsuccessful because Montag can’t understand them and Mildred prefers watching television.

Montag goes to visit Faber, a retired English professor he met in a park a year ago, to help him read the books.

On the subway trip over, he tries to memorize passages from the Bible.

Faber explains to Montag what’s missing from their society: quality of information, the leisure to digest it, and the freedom to act on it.

After some prodding, Faber agrees to help Montag. He gives Montag a tiny two-way audio receiver/transmitter, which Montag places in his ear.

Mildred’s friends are visiting when Montag gets home. Montag is infuriated by their superficiality and reads poetry to them.

Montag goes to work and hands a book—not the Bible—over to Beatty.

An alarm comes in. The firemen rush to the address. It’s Montag’s house.

Mildred leaves the house and ducks into a taxi—she was the one who called in the alarm!

Following Beatty’s orders, Montag burns his own house with a flamethrower.

Beatty taunts Montag until Montag kills Beatty with the flamethrower. The Mechanical Hound attacks Montag, but he’s able to destroy it.

Now a fugitive, Montag visits Faber.

The manhunt for Montag is broadcast everywhere.

Montag reaches the river with a new Mechanical Hound close behind him. He floats to safety.

Out in the countryside, Montag stumbles across a group of hobo-scholars, outcasts from society.

The scholars have memorized many books. They’re waiting for a time when they can write the books down again. They accept Montag, who has memorized parts of the Bible.

Bombers fly overhead. The war begins and quickly ends. The city has been incinerated.

The men start walking toward the city to help the survivors rebuild.