

You're listening to imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

EM: Uh, yeah, can I get your levels?

NEIL: This is me. This is me talking. Peter Piper picked a pack of pickled peppers!

That is the voice of Neil Gaiman – master of modern fantasy. But he wasn't here to talk about the stories he's best known for like *American Gods*, or *Coralline*. Although I did tell him that as a teenager -- like many Gen Xers -- I had a crush on his version of Death in the *Sandman* series who looked to me like a Goth version of Winona Ryder.

But the reason why he agreed to come talk with me is because he's a huge fan of Ray Bradbury. In fact he wrote the introduction to the latest edition of *Fahrenheit 451*.

He has a vivid memory of discovering *Fahrenheit 451* when he as a kid. He was particularly fascinated by the main character.

NEIL: The first time I read it, I read something that was an adventure about a man who was a good man in a bad job....He was a fireman. He burned down houses of people with books and that seemed a cool science fictional idea in itself. Because I lived in a world in which firemen came and saved you and they put out fires. I didn't really understand things like his marriage falling apart. Huge swatches the plot I missed but that's fine because when you're nine years old you know that you're going to read the book later and you'll take from it what is there for you.

Alice Hoffman is the author of many wonderful novels including *Practical Magic* and *The Red Garden*. She also discovered *Fahrenheit 451* as a child. But her circumstances were different. Her parents had just divorced, and one of the few things that her father left behind was a collection of books, including Ray Bradbury novels.

ALICE: You know it was a time really when I needed a sort of a father figure or moral voice, and I feel like Ray is that. He was such a moral voice that there was such a center there was there was a sense of right and wrong in his books. And you know that's a good thing especially when you're a young reader.

But she put the book away as a child, and didn't pick it up again until September 2001.

ALICE: You know I didn't believe in writer's block until I had it. And I had it after 9/11 because I felt like there was no point in doing anything but certainly no point in writing I felt like books were going to burn up. And my inner child or my inner self told me to go back and read Fahrenheit 451. And when I read that book again I realized how important books were and I've realized how important stories were and I got you know I was able to write again you know.

Fahrenheit 451 is the kind of book that most kids are assigned to read at some point in school. But I was never assigned to read it, so I didn't – although I loved other Ray Bradbury novels. One of my favorite books as a kid was Dandelion Wine.

But after the 2016 election, this dusty old literary classic jumped to the top of the bestseller lists, along with other dystopian novels like 1984 and Animal Farm. So I finally read it, starting with Neil Gaiman's thoughtful introduction.

NEIL: One of the things that completely fascinated me with F451 was I thought I'm going to do something never done before, F451 is in a lot of schools, kids forced to read it, what ones who hate it saying? Went on Amazon, one star reviews all left by angry kids who had to read it and hated it. And that weirdly when I came to write introduction was my engine, I want to explain this book in a way that you a 12 year old kid in Idaho who has been assigned to read it and would hate it, tell you enough about.

On what grounds did they hate it?

NEIL: Most of the time they aren't telling you they hate it, it's boring, don't understand it, it's leaden, several kids announced they burned their copies and one shot it with BB gun, but part of it is SF is always literature of present, and the present is the time it's written.

Although coming to it as an adult, I could see much more easily what was dated – what felt very 1950s – and how the themes in the book feel more relevant than ever.

And I think each of the characters in Fahrenheit 451 represents a challenge to the reader. If you lived in this world – what would you do? Who would you be?

Rich Orlow has thought a lot about that. For the last decade, he's been performing a one-man-show of Fahrenheit 451, using a script that was approved by Ray Bradbury before Bradbury died in 2012. And Rich has an uncanny ability to do male and female voices without being campy about it.

But the character he identifies with the most is Guy Montag, so he basically used his own voice for that one. Montag is the fireman who starts to question why they're burning books – which eventually leads Montag towards a personal crisis.

RICH: You know he goes from someone who is kind of destructive thinks he knows it all kind of angry but there's a core of in him that tells him that there's something more than this and that's kind of how I was when I was young. I was kind of a -- not the happiest kid. That's for sure I was very angry. I grew up in not the best circumstances per se. And you know I had a lot of wrong ways of seeing the world thinking I knew it all too, and then you know getting away from home and going to college and meeting people that were different that I thought I had all these judgments on. I was totally wrong. And he doesn't know anything and eventually at the end of the book, he says I was an idiot the whole way. I can identify with that!

Here is Rich performing a scene where Montag reveals to his wife, Millie, that he's unhappy at work.

When I wake up I have chills and a fever

Oh you can't be sick. You are all right last night

Millie didn't what happened last night. We burn a thousand books. We burnt a woman.

Well?

Well?! Well you should have seen it, Millie. God there's got to be things in books things that you can imagine to make a woman stay in a burning house. You wouldn't stay for nothing. She was as rational as you and I. And we burned her. Have you ever seen a burning house? It's smolders for days. I've been trying to put it out my mind I'm crazy with trying and I'm sick and it's not just the woman that died and I'm thinking about all the kerosene that I have used in the past ten years and I'm thinking about those books. And for the first time I realized that

there was a man behind each one of those books. A man had to think them up. A man had to put them down on paper. It may have taken some man a lifetime to put his thoughts down on paper and then along I come in two minutes and boom it's all over.

Leave me alone. I didn't do anything to you!

Wow that was chilling, it's so interesting to hear Millie.

RICH: When I think of Millie, she self medicates, the whole book she's half-out of it. Her character never really confronts the really underlying cause of all these things and she distracts herself with television you know and that's her life even calls him her TV family.

The opposite to Millie is Montag's next door neighbor, a 17-year old girl named Clarisse McClellan. She only appears in the beginning of the book, but she plays a pivotal role in awakening Montag's conscience.

You know I'm not afraid of you at all. So many people are there afraid of firemen but you are just a man after all. How long have you worked at being a fireman? Since I was 20 10 years ago.

Do you ever read any of the books that you burn?

No. That's against the law.

Oh yes of course!

Hey it's fine work. Monday you burned Edna Millay. Wednesday Walt Whitman Friday Faulkner -- you burn them to ashes and then you burn the ashes. That's our official slogan.

Is it true that a long time ago firemen used to put out fires instead of going to start them?

No.

That's strange because I heard that houses used to burn by accident and they needed firemen to stop the flames. Why are you laughing? You laugh when I haven't been funny.

The fourth major character in the book is Montag's boss, the anti-intellectual Captain Beatty. Rich found Beatty's voice through a line that Bradbury wrote.

We must all be alike. Not everybody born free and equal like the Constitution says but everybody made equal each man the image of every other. For then all are happy for there are no mountains to judge yourself against or to make it. So a book is a loaded weapon in the house next door. Burn it! Burn it! Who knows who may be the target of a well-read man. I will not stomach them for a minute.

That's a really important moment because Beatty reveals something to Montag, which may be surprising to some readers. This whole book burning business didn't come from the government, at least not at first. It came from the people. Every book contained something that somebody found offensive. The firemen began by burning the most offensive books. The people cheered. So they just kept going.

When the houses were finally fireproofed completely there was no need for firemen for the old purposes. They were given a new job as the custodians of our piece of mind == the focus of our rightful dread of our being inferior, official judges, censors and executioners. That is you, Montag. And that's me.

Jon Eller is the director of the Center for Ray Bradbury Studies at Indiana University. He says book banning was very much on Bradbury's mind when he wrote Fahrenheit 451 in the early '50s, as the McCarthy hearings were ramping up.

JON: Ray Bradbury felt that the ban on books or the censorship of books would probably start with supernatural literature and fantasy. And so he started to write a series of about a half a dozen stories in the late forties that touched on the issue of the banning of supernatural fiction or the burning of supernatural fiction. ***Did I read that he was descended from Mary Bradbury who was one that people in the Salem Witch Trials?***

JON: Oh yes he was. Mary Bradbury was his direct ancestor. She was tried of course in the early 1690s -- found guilty of taking on spectral forms. I think it was the form of a wild boar someone accused her of and she was sentenced to death. But over time, the colonial government changed and she was spared.

But Bradbury's initial spark of inspiration came from a personal experience. Once night, he was walking with a friend in Los Angeles and a policeman stopped and questioned them. Bradbury was so annoyed, he wrote a short story called The Pedestrian, which took place in a high tech totalitarian future. That short story eventually evolved into the world of Fahrenheit 451.

One of the most endearing details about Fahrenheit 451 is that Bradbury wrote the novel on coin-operated typewriter at his local library. When it was done, he called his fire department to ask what temperature a book would burn. They told him 451 degrees, and that's how he got the title.

When it was published in 1953, Fahrenheit 451 was a critical and commercial success -- but it was not seen as an instant classic. Other Bradbury books like The Martian Chronicles were more popular for a long time.

JON: But by the 80s and 90s as we're dealing with these technological marvels and we have the challenge of preserving unmediated literature and great ideas, people began to see that too to remind us all that literacy is important. Then Fahrenheit began to become a staple in schools.

But every year, parents try to lobby the American Library Association to remove Fahrenheit 451 from the shelves because they claim it has offensive language like "hell" and "damn" – not because it's encouraging kids to question authority. No, that couldn't be it.

For a while, there was an edited version of Fahrenheit 451 being circulated in schools that had words like "hell" and "damn" removed. When Ray Bradbury found out about it, he was mad. He got the original text reinstated and wrote a new coda that is still in every copy of the book.

JON: It's a coda where he at the end I will not go gently onto a shelf de-gutted to become a non-book.

Here's Bradbury himself.

CLIP: I get letters from teachers all the time saying that my books have been banned temporarily and I say don't worry about it, put them on the shelves again and they say, gee how did they get back on there? And you keep putting them back and they keep taking them off and you finally win. But be very quiet about it and don't ask for my help because if I come to your town to help you I'm a big frog in a small puddle, they'll hate me, all of them, all the people, so you can't ask me to interfere, you do the job, you're the librarian, you're the teacher, stand firm and they always do.

In a moment, Fahrenheit 451 leaps off the page and becomes something that's much harder to burn.

BREAK

Part of what helped Fahrenheit 451 endure beyond all the challenges at local libraries was the way the story got adapted. It's been turned into a graphic novel, movies, and a play. There have been radio drama adaptations here and abroad.

PHIL: They've all been so different and so playful.

Phil Nichols teaches TV and film at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK. Strangely enough, the first film adaptation didn't come from Hollywood. François Truffaut directed the 1966 film.

PHIL: It's a very strange film it's a combination of French New Wave filmmaking and an American story and it was shot in England and it was directed by a director who didn't speak a word of English even though the film was made in English.

And the actor playing Montag had a thick Austrian accent for no apparent reason.

CLIP: 1966 MOVIE

The critics were underwhelmed. But:

PHIL: Bradbury himself at the time loved the film. He wrote a review of it for I think it was the New York Times or The L.A. Times and in the review he says something like my book looks at your film and sees itself -- even though some of his friends tried to tell him that it's not as good as you think it is. As the years went by Bradbury's own view of the film changed somewhat. In the forty odd years between the film's release, Bradbury's view shifted to the point where he said Truffaut had ruined Fahrenheit 451.

Neil Gaiman was never a big fan of the movie. He was particularly disturbed by the ending. In the book and the movie, Montag quits the fire department and joins the resistance, where discovers the quote "book people" – who invented an ingenious way to preserve books. Each of them chooses a book to memorize.

NEIL: I think in the book you can almost hear the trumpets as people are introduced as you realize that yes you can destroy a book but you cannot destroy the content of the book, and some books are people, the books are inside us and

we can bring them out again, the oral tradition is wonderful. In the film nobody is telling the content of their book to another person. And I think that is the thing that makes it seem like madness like a waste of time like pointless. They're all on their own, not making eye contact with each other, mumbling their stories, mumbling their books that they've remembered.

CLIP 1966 MOVIE

NEIL: That makes me think a lot is the one thing that I don't think Fahrenheit 451 warns us about enough which is because why would it have done which is it seems to me like the best way to lose the good books and to lose literacy and to lose all those points of view is not to burn them, but it's to bury them under a million bad books. You know we're now at a point where more data is being produced every hour than was being produced in the previous centuries. You know in the old days you needed a guide through the desert to find the one flower growing in the desert of information of knowledge of story, and now we're wandering through an overgrown jungle and we need a flamethrower just to clear out the weeds and a map to try and find where the good stuff is.

Even though Bradbury came to dislike the movie, he actually wrote a play in the '70s that incorporated a lot of elements from the Truffaut film.

But the biggest change Bradbury made to his own story was the character of Beatty. In the novel, Captain Beatty is a pure villain but in the play, he became a tragic anti-hero.

Jonathan Eller says that change actually came from Bradbury's insecurities as a writer. It always bothered Bradbury that his villain was so two-dimensional.

JON: He always worried the most about writing character. He knew that he had very interesting ideas based on basic fears and hopes and aspirations and terrors and loves of human beings but sometimes he had to work very hard to develop characters.

All the work he did on Captain Beatty struck a chord with Julia Wilhelm. She's a senior at McKinney Boyd High School outside Dallas. When she heard her drama teacher was putting on the play Fahrenheit 451:

JULIA: I read the script and the character that I really wanted to play was Beatty and because it was the most complex and contradictory character in the show kind of like Aaron Burr like a Judas you know.

I wanted to hear from these kids because I was curious – how does Fahrenheit 451 hold up? What does this story say to them today?

Julia Wilhelm's teacher Jonathan Pitzer was wondering the same thing. That's why for this play, he didn't do the usual auditions. He interviewed the kids to find out how deeply they had thought about Fahrenheit 451. He was shocked when Julia came in:

JONATHAN: She came with notes and she had like a PowerPoint and she had drawings of the characters and she had really put in the time for Captain Beatty and I told her I said you know you know that's a man, right? And she said yeah but it doesn't have to be. That's the part I want.

This was her pitch to the teacher. What if Clarisse McClellan, the idealistic girl who lives next door to Montag, didn't die a martyr as she does in the book, and didn't turn into resistance fighter as she does in the movie and the play? What if she became cynical? What if that's the type of person Captain Beatty used to be before Beatty grew up?

JULIA: Leading up to when the story starts. As this world is changing and books are getting burned and people aren't listening to each other. She sees books and they offer no comfort to her and no solace no peace. That's actually one of the lines, and she doesn't see books as helping her anymore and because she doesn't think the answer is in books, she looks to the government or these restrictions because books haven't fixed the terrible things that have happened to her. She says, well might as well burn them.

Burning to ashes and burn the ashes

And I would say it like something you've heard every single day at the firehouse, like in my class you hear every day is an audition it's something you hear Beatty say all the time and you're imitating Beatty by saying it.

Okay. Don't you know the rules, bur them – ugh, don't you know the rules? Burn them to ashes and burn the ashes

You seem awfully pleased about it

It's a job.

I can see that.

When Jonathan Pitzer decided to put on Fahrenheit 451, he thought the kids would relate to the show because it's about technology. Bradbury was really prescient -- the characters walk around with devices in their ears called seashells, which are remarkably like Bluetooth ear buds and headsets. Everyone has wall-sized, flat screen TVs -- even interactive television that feels like Skype.

In fact, 2018 HBO movie featured that stuff heavily. Michael B. Jordan played Montag as a social media star who burns books on multi-media simulcasts with emojis of fire and smile faces floating around him.

CLIP: HBO MOVIE

And the kids did relate to technology aspect of the story. But something else really spoke to them in the play, something they deal with on a regular basis: how do you fight dangerous ideas in a country that guarantees freedom of speech? In Fahrenheit 451, those are two different issues. The paper books contain the ideas, while the technology is full of empty distractions. But in their world, technology is the battleground for offensive ideas.

Bennett Burke plays Montag in the show.

BENNETT: You hear a lot of people they'll spout bigotry and whatnot and they'll argue that when someone criticizes them they'll say well I have free speech. It's like yeah it's a two it's a two-way road. People have the free speech to say nasty and vile things but their employers and their friends and their family have the free speech to shun them for it and get rid of their job and that's a bad idea.

JULIA: Once Montag we were a small country, but then we grew.

This is Julia Wilhelm performing as Captain Beatty:

JULIA: And by the millions they poured in upon on us, and finally you have 300 million doctors, lawyers, Baptists, block headed Swedes, beer fat Germans -- Blacks don't like Little Black Sambo? Burn it. White people hate Uncle Tom's Cabin? Burn it. The Jews hate Fagan and Oliver Twist. Burn Fagan. Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice -- women's lib hates that -- into the furnace. More

comic books, more gossip, plenty facts, but no meaning. And there you have it Montag. Lecture's over.

Again, Neil Gaiman:

NEIL: I want people to keep reading F451 for that speech the idea if this is offending you we cut it out and eventually you won't find something unoffended, nothing left, ideas need to offend, they need to challenge, they need to make you think, they need to turn assumption upside-down. Right now watching people on the left and the right and weird middle on fringes all deal with information overload how you cope with ideas you do not want to deal with, whether good ideas or evil ideas. And that feels so amazingly relevant this is part of the entirety of F451 has to give us right now.

Fahrenheit 451 has grown beyond just being a book. It's an idea. It's a living document that has taken on a life of it's own. You could burn every copy and it wouldn't make a difference. Ideas – good ideas – are resilient. They can be more powerful than any one author, book, movie or play.

Or, as the novelist Alice Hoffman put it:

ALICE: I think it's iconic because every generation has the fears that are in Fahrenheit 451 how do we how do we continue to be people who care about books and care about life and care about the truth. And I also think right now you know there's this sense of the news can be manipulated which it is manipulated in Fahrenheit 451 and that books can be viewed as dangerous. The truth can be viewed as dangerous and there's kind of a mob mentality. And I think for right now I feel like this book should be on every reading list.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Neil Gaiman, Alice Hoffman, Jonathan Eller, Phil Nichols, Rich Orlow, the students and teachers at McKinney Boyd High School, and Hady Mawajdeh, who recorded them. This episode was an adaptation of a piece that I did for Studio 360's American Icons series.

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagin worlds pod.

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