

# *Captain Beatty's Speech*

Captain Beatty is a bit of paradox. He's the head honcho fireman, but he knows more about books than anyone else. He burns these texts with a fiery vengeance, but he spends half his time quoting from them. It's not until Beatty gives Guy that big speech in Part One that we understand what's going on in this man's head. He used to be curious about books, just like Montag is. He used to question the system, just like Montag. And just like Montag, he took action – he read. What makes Beatty such a powerful force in this novel is that, actually, he makes a decent point in his anti-book ravings. Literature is contradictory. It is confusing. It is treacherous, it will mix you up, it will force you to answer questions you never wanted to ask, and it will quite often pull the rug out from under your feet.

But that's one of the lessons of *Fahrenheit 451*. It's not about what books say, it's about the process of reading them and thinking for yourself. It's about questioning. This, of course, is the reason books were abolished in the first place – not for the information they held, but for the dissent they caused amongst their readers. So Beatty is right to argue that books are contradictory. But he misses the point. Contradictions are the whole idea behind literature.

## **SECTION #1**

When did it all start, you ask . . . ? Well, I'd say it really got started around about a thing called the Civil War . . . The fact is we didn't get along well until photography came into its own. Then – motion pictures in the early twentieth century. Radio. Television. Things began to have mass . . .

And because they had mass, they became simpler . . . Once, books appealed to a few people, here, there, everywhere. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of eyes and elbows and mouths. Double, triple, quadruple population. Films and radios, magazines, books levelled down to a sort of paste pudding norm . . .

Picture it. Nineteenth-century man with his horses, dogs, carts, slow motion. Then, in the twentieth century, speed up your camera. Books cut shorter. Condensations, Digests. Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending . . .

Classics cut to fit fifteen-minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two-minute book column, winding up at last as a ten- or twelve-line dictionary resume. I exaggerate, of course. The dictionaries were for reference. But many were those whose sole knowledge of Hamlet . . . was a one-page digest in a book that claimed: 'now at least you can read all the classics; keep up with your neighbours.' Do you see? Out of the nursery into the college and back to the nursery; there's your intellectual pattern for the past five centuries or more . . .

Politics? One column, two sentences, a headline! Then, in mid-air, all vanishes! 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! . . .

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## **SECTION #2**

School is shortened, discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts?

The zipper displaces the button and a man lacks just that much time to think while dressing at dawn, a philosophical hour, and thus a melancholy hour . . .

Empty the theatres save for clowns and furnish the rooms with glass walls and pretty colours running up and down the walls like confetti or blood or sherry or sauterne . . .

More sports for everyone, group spirit, fun, and you don't have to think, eh? Organize and organize and superorganize super-super sports. More cartoons in books. More pictures. The mind drinks less and less. Impatience. Highways full of crowds going somewhere, somewhere, somewhere, nowhere. The gasoline refugee. Towns turn into motels, people in nomadic surges from place to place, following the moon tides, living tonight in the room where you slept this noon and I the night before . . .

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## **SECTION #3**

Now let's take up the minorities in our civilization, shall we? 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 people in this book, this play, this TV serial are not meant to represent any actual painters, cartographers, mechanics anywhere.

The bigger your market . . . the less you handle controversy, remember that! All the minor minorities with their navels to be kept clean. Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters. They did. Magazines became a nice blend of vanilla tapioca. Books, so the damned snobbish critics said, were dishwater. No wonder books stopped selling, the critics said. But the public, knowing what it wanted, spinning happily, let the comic-books survive. And the three-dimensional sex-magazines, of course . . .

It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read comics, the good old confessions, or trade-journals . . .

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## **SECTION #4**

With school turning out more runners, jumpers, racers, tinkers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and imaginative creators, the word 'intellectual,' of course, became the swear word it deserved to be. You always dread the unfamiliar. Surely you remember the boy in your own school class who was exceptionally 'bright,' did most of the reciting and answering while the others sat like so many leaden idols, hating him. And wasn't it this bright boy you selected for beatings and tortures after hours? Of course it was. We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against.

So! A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man? Me? I won't stomach them for a minute . . .

You must understand that our civilization is so vast that we can't have our minorities upset and stirred. Ask yourself, What do we want in this country, above all? People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren't they? Don't we keep them moving, don't we give them fun? That's all we live for, isn't it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these . . .

Coloured people don't like Little Black Sambo. Burn it. White people don't feel good about Uncle Tom's Cabin. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Bum the book. Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag. Take your fight outside. Better yet, into the incinerator. Funerals are unhappy and pagan? Eliminate them, too. Five minutes after a person is dead he's on his way to the Big Flue, the Incinerators serviced by helicopters all over the country. Ten minutes after death a man's a speck of black dust. Let's not quibble over individuals with memoriams. Forget them. Burn them all, burn everything. Fire is bright and fire is clean . . .

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## **SECTION #5**

Heredity and environment are funny things. You can't rid yourselves of all the odd ducks in just a few years. The home environment can undo a lot you try to do at school. That's why we've lowered the kindergarten age year after year until now we're almost snatching them from the cradle.

We had some false alarms . . . [but] [n]ever found a book. Mixed record; anti-social . . . [people are] a time bomb. The family had been feeding [the] subconscious, I'm sure . . . [People don't] want to know *how* a thing was done, but *why*. That can be embarrassing. You ask *why* to a lot of things and you wind up very unhappy indeed, if you keep at it. [People are] better off dead . . .

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**CONFORM      CONSUME      OBEY**

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Luckily, queer ones like her don't happen, often. We know how to nip most of them in the bud, early. You can't build a house without nails and wood. If you don't want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none. Let him forget there is such a thing as war. If the Government is inefficient, top-heavy, and tax-mad, better it be all those than that people worry over it . . .

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## **SECTION #6**

Give the people contests they win by remembering the words to more popular songs or the names of state capitals or how much corn Iowa grew last year. Cram them full of non-combustible data, chock them so damned full of 'facts' they feel stuffed, but absolutely 'brilliant' with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy, because facts of that sort don't change.

Don't give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy. Any man who can take a TV wall apart and put it back together again, and most men can nowadays, is happier than any man who tries to slide-rule, measure, and equate the universe, which just won't be measured or equated without making man feel bestial and lonely. I know, I've tried it; to hell with it. So bring on your clubs and parties, your acrobats and magicians, your dare-devils, jet cars, motor-cycle helicopters, your sex and heroin, more of everything to do with automatic reflex. If the drama is bad, if the film says nothing, if the play is hollow, sting me with the theremin, loudly. I'll think I'm responding to the play, when it's only a tactile reaction to vibration. But I don't care. I just like solid entertainment.

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For the full Speech, see pages 51-58

**First:** Section # \_\_\_\_\_ Notes:

As you read your section, take notes regarding the key points that Beatty is trying to make to Montag. Feel free to jot down his examples (or your own!) to back up his points.

**Second:**

As each row presents its section, take notes on any and all salient points. Just place an "X" when it is your section.

**Section #1:**

**Section #2:**

**Section #3:**

**Section #4:**

**Section #5:**

**Section #6:**

**Third:**

After each group has presented, answer the following questions:

Explain what started all the problems for society as seen in *Fahrenheit 451*.

According to Beatty, what does it take to keep people happy and occupied?

What is the message that Bradbury was trying to get across with his book?

How does this speech apply to Montag before he met Clarisse?

How does it apply to Mildred?

How does it apply to Clarisse?

Name three points that Captain Beatty makes that are applicable to modern society. These should be written as sentences.

1.

2.

3.