

The Mechanical Hound:

A reincarnation of the vengeful Furies from Greek mythology and the epitome of modern perverted science, the Mechanical Hound is a slick electronic hit man formed of copper wire and storage batteries and smelling of blue electricity. He is an omnipresent menace capable of storing "so many amino acids, so much sulphur, so much butterfat and alkaline" that he can inexorably trail the odor index of ten thousand victims to their doom. From his snout projects a "four-inch hollow steel needle," which can inject enough morphine or procaine to quell a rat, cat, or chicken within three seconds. Sniffing its quarry with "sensitive capillary hairs in the Nylon-brushed nostrils," the Hound growls and then scuttles silently toward its prey on eight rubber-padded feet. Sighting through the "green-blue neon light" of its multifaceted eyes, the Hound is masterminded by a central command for rapid deployment and near perfect accuracy.

The Hound represents government control and manipulation of technology. Originally, dogs served as the rescuers for firemen. They were given the job of sniffing out the injured or weak. However, in this dystopia, the Hound has been made into a watchdog of society. Like the Furies, the Mechanical Hound has been programmed (by the government) to avenge and punish citizens who break society's rules. The ones who are not loyal to the rules must especially be punished, and the Hound serves as the enforcer of these rules.

The novel's protagonist, **Guy Montag**, takes pride in his work with the fire department. A third-generation fireman, Montag fits the stereotypical role, with his "black hair, black brows...fiery face, and...blue-steel shaved but unshaved look." Montag takes great joy in his work and serves as a model of twenty-fourth-century professionalism. Reeking of cinders and ash, he enjoys dressing in his uniform, playing the role of a symphony conductor as he directs the brass nozzle toward illegal books, and smelling the kerosene that raises the temperature to the required 451 degrees Fahrenheit — the temperature at which book paper ignites. In his first eight years of employment, Montag even joined in the firemen's bestial sport of letting small animals loose and betting on which ones the Mechanical Hound would annihilate first.

In the last two years, however, a growing discontent has grown in Montag, a "fireman turned sour" who cannot yet name the cause of his emptiness and disaffection. He characterizes his restless mind as "full of bits and pieces," and he requires sedatives to sleep. His hands, more attuned to his inner workings than his conscious mind, seem to take charge of his behavior. Daily, he returns to a loveless, meaningless marriage symbolized by his cold bedroom furnished with twin beds. Drawn to the lights and conversation of the McClellan family next door, he forces himself to remain at home, yet he watches them through the French windows.

Through his friendship with Clarisse McClellan, Montag perceives the harshness of society as opposed to the joys of nature in which he rarely partakes. When Clarisse teases him about not being in love, he experiences an epiphany and sinks into a despair that characterizes most of the novel. He suffers guilt for hiding books behind the hall ventilator grille and for failing to love his wife, whom he cannot remember meeting for the first time. But even though he harbors no affection for Mildred, Montag shudders at the impersonal, mechanized medical care that restores his dying wife to health. Montag's moroseness reaches a critical point after he witnesses the burning of an old woman, who willingly embraces death when the firemen come to burn her books. His psychosomatic illness, a significant mix of chills and fever, fails to fool his employer, who easily identifies the cause of Montag's malaise — a dangerously expanded sensibility in a world that prizes a dulled consciousness. Lured by books, Montag forces Mildred to join him in reading. His hunger for humanistic knowledge drives him to Professor Faber, the one educated person that he can trust to teach him.

Following the burning of an old woman, his company's first human victim, Montag faces an agonizing spiritual dilemma of love and hate for his job. As a fireman, he is marked by the phoenix symbol, but ironically, he is inhibited from rising like the fabled bird because he lacks the know-how to transform intellectual growth into deeds. After he contacts Faber, however, Montag begins a metamorphosis that signifies his rebirth as the phoenix of a new generation. A duality evolves, the blend of himself and Faber, his alter ego. With Faber's help, Montag weathers the transformation and returns to his job to confront Captain Beatty, his nemesis. Beatty classifies Montag's problem as an intense romanticism actualized by his contact with Clarisse. Pulled back and forth between Faber's words from the listening device in his ear and the cynical sneers and gibes of Beatty, who cites lines from so many works of literature that he dazzles his adversary, Montag moves blindly to the fire truck when an alarm sounds. Beatty, who rarely drives, takes the wheel and propels the fire truck toward the next target — Montag's house.

When Beatty prepares to arrest him, Montag realizes that he cannot contain his loathing for a sadistic, escapist society. Momentarily contemplating the consequences of his act, he ignites Beatty and watches him burn. As Montag races away from the lurid scene, he momentarily suffers a wave of remorse but quickly concludes that Beatty maneuvered him into the killing. Resourceful and courageous, Montag outwits the Mechanical Hound, but impaired by a numbed leg, he is nearly run over by a car full of murderous teenage joyriders. With Faber's help, he embraces his budding idealism and hopes for escaping to a better life, one in which dissent and discussion redeem humanity from its gloomy dark age.

Baptized to a new life by his plunge into the river and dressed in Faber's clothes, Montag flees the cruel society, which is fated to suffer a brief, annihilating attack. The cataclysm forces him face down onto the earth, where he experiences a disjointed remembrance of his courtship ten years earlier. Just as his leg recovers its feeling, Montag's humanity returns. After Granger helps him accept the destruction of the city and the probable annihilation of Mildred, Montag looks forward to a time when people and books can again flourish.

A satanic presence enshrouded in "thunderheads of tobacco smoke," **Captain Beatty** is the shrewd, ruthless antagonist of the story; he is linked repeatedly to fire and to the Fates as represented by recurrent card games. As leader of a fire company, he hosts an unwholesome camaraderie with the bureaucratized book burners who follow his orders. Symbolically, he drives a "yellow-flame-colored beetle with...black, char-colored tires." Like the Mechanical Hound, he noses out information, such as the pattern of disloyalty in firemen, Montag's relationship with Clarisse, and the presence of books in Montag's house. He remains attuned to the idiosyncrasies of his men and is not deceived by Montag's feigned illness. His authoritarian nature surfaces in his terse order to Mildred to turn off her screens and to Guy to return to work later in the shift.

A malicious, destructive phoenix fire chief, Beatty is an educated, perceptive manipulator who surrounds himself with a nest of literary snippets. From this mishmash of aphorisms, he selects appropriate weapons with which to needle and vex Montag, his adversary, in a one-sided verbal duel. Beatty's stand against the dissenting fireman is an essential outgrowth of his role as the sole phoenix in this dark world. At Montag's bedside and later in front of his house, Beatty overestimates his control of a desperate man.

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. Did you notice how his speech is full of Biblical references? "You've been locked up here for years with a regular damned Tower of Babel," he tells the old woman. "You think you can walk on water with your books," he says to Montag. He even mentions the Greek myth of Icarus. He's the most well-read book-burner we've ever encountered.

It's not until Beatty gives Montag that big speech in Part One that we understand what's going on in this guy'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, rules be damned. So what in the world makes him different from Montag?

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.

That is what makes Beatty different from Montag. He's not willing to do the thinking. He doesn't want to question and think. He turned books down because they don't hand him The Secret of the Universe all tied up with a bow. Montag, on the other hand, wants to work for his knowledge. He wants to understand what he reads, as he tells Faber, and then think for himself to decide in what he believes.

A lover of life and nature, **Clarisse**, an affable neighbor who is seventeen. Delightfully human and aware of her surroundings, Clarisse disdains the fact-learning that passes for modern education. She enjoys rain, dandelions, autumn leaves, and even sessions with her analyst, who misdiagnoses her exuberance for living.

Powered by an insatiable curiosity, Clarisse, whom Beatty labels a "time bomb," serves as the catalyst that impels Montag toward a painful but necessary self-examination. With gentle pricks to his self-awareness, Clarisse reveals to him the absence of love, pleasure, and contentment in his life. Her role in the novel is only the forerunner of the spiritual revitalization completed by Faber and Granger. Her outcome underscores the rampant dehumanization of society and the resulting random acts of violence.

Clarisse is an odd duck by this new world's standards. She likes nature, she isn't into violence or TV, and she's not into vacant socializing. She's interested in odd things, which is what draws her to Montag – he's a fireman without the typical fireman qualities. She gets to ask him questions about his job, questions that no one else in his position would ever be willing to answer.

So Clarisse isn't trying to teach Montag anything. She's trying to learn from him. It's just that her constant questioning ends up pushing the already-doubt-ridden fireman over the edge. Clarisse never tells Montag what to think; she just shows him that thinking is an option. She invites him to do it for himself, and he walks through the door she opens.

She's incompatible with her surroundings. We don't know all the details of her outcome, nor is the confusion reconciled by the end of the novel. But we can't help but think of Clarisse when Granger discusses the thumbprint on his mind left by his grandfather. Even after her disappearance, Clarisse continues to affect Montag. She exists because she changed his mind, whereas someone like Mildred hardly existed at all.

Quivering on the brink of rebellion against the causal drift of society from humanism to oppression, **Professor Faber**, a bloodless, white-haired academic who protects his "peanut-brittle bones" and castigates himself for his "terrible cowardice," represents a sterling redeeming quality — a belief in the integrity of the individual. He reveres the magic in literature, which "stitched the patches of the universe into one garment for us."

Because he is over twice Montag's age and was forced into exile forty years earlier, Faber provides the look backward that enables the hero to see how a literate society allowed itself to slide into mechanization and repression. Willing to read books, discuss philosophies, and enable his disciple to escape the avenging dystopia, Faber is reduced to a soothing, insightful, cajoling voice (serving as Montag's conscience) in Montag's ear. However, Faber is invigorated by his contact with Montag, and after the listening device falls into Beatty's hands, he leaves the disintegrating city for St. Louis, where he hopes to produce books with a fellow bibliophile.

An aging intellectual in a world with no place for such people, Faber greatly disapproves of the dehumanized, oppressive society in which he lives. However, Faber feels it is safer to live discreetly rather than protest or attempt to change the world. Faber and Montag first met years ago in a park and after a long discussion about books, gave Montag his contact information. After Montag is taken in by the magic of books, he seeks Faber out and together, the two men try to work together against their oppressive society. When Montag is running from the law, Faber helps him escape.

Faber is the second of Montag's three mentors and teaches him one important lesson: it's not about the books. Books reflect *life*, he explains, or at least the good ones do. He's fairly adamant about his philosophy – he calls Montag a fool and will hear nothing in the way of opposition.

So how did Faber get this way? We know that he's an ex-professor and that he's old enough to have watched the decline of intellectual life in his country. More important than his understanding of literature is his knowledge of how it went out of fashion – how and why people simply stopped reading. Because of this, he can more practically assess the problem with the fireman institution and more reasonably devise a way to override it. But it also limits him. He's reluctant and even declares himself a coward. Is he a coward? Or does he do all he can with the means available to him? You tell us.

Montag's wife whom he courted in Chicago and married when they both were twenty, **Mildred** characterizes shallowness and mediocrity. Her abnormally white flesh and chemically burnt hair epitomize a society that demands an artificial beauty in women through diets and hair dye. Completely immersed in an electronic world and growing more incompatible with Montag with every electronic gadget that enters her house, she fills her waking hours with manic drives in the beetle and by watching a TV clown, who distracts her from her real feelings and leads her nearly to suicide from a drug overdose. Unwilling and unable to analyze rationally, she lives the shallow life that Beatty touts — acquiescence to a technological chamber of horrors. She distances herself from real emotion by identifying with "the family," a three-dimensional fiction in which she plays a scripted part. Her longing for a fourth wall of television suggests her capability of submerging in fantasy to withdraw from the roles of wife, mother, and whole human being.

Addicted to the labor-saving machines that toast and butter her bread and fill her mind with simplistic entertainment, she forgets to bring aspirin to her ailing husband and recedes into monosyllabic communication. Her replies to him are impersonal and callous, as illustrated by her bland announcement of Clarisse's death. To remove any doubts about her materialistic, robotic lifestyle, Mildred surrounds herself with friends like Clara Phelps and Ann Bowles, vapid and witless dullards who select a presidential candidate by his televised good looks. Unsurprisingly, Mildred betrays her husband and flees their marriage while mourning the loss of her TV family.

Mildred is around in this novel to remind us what the average Joe (or Jane) is like. In a story of extraordinary people—Montag, Clarisse, Faber, Granger, and even Beatty—we need to understand the status quo to appreciate the deviation from it. So that's where Mildred comes in. She's bland, vacant, and obsessed with television. In fact, the most interesting thing she does during the whole novel is attempt suicide.

Right, about that...What makes Mildred pop 30+ pills? It could be, as Montag wonders, that she took one, and then forgot she took one and took another, and forgot about that and took another, etc. If this is true, then the worst we can say of her is that she's, well, kind of *dumb*. But we already knew that.

The alternative is a little more interesting: Mildred is deeply unhappy. She's severely bothered by the fact that her life is empty and filled with hours of mindless television. But in this world, it's Mildred's job to be happy. Remember when she insists to her husband that she's satisfied with their life? "I'm proud of it," she says. She's done her duty by convincing herself she's happy. Since Mildred is the poster child for the average citizen in this future world, we start to wonder if everyone is a desperate suicide case with a shiny smiling veneer. Given that the plumbers who pumped her stomach in Part One have ten similar cases a night, we have to wonder.

Granger is also associated with burning. However, the warming, beneficial campfire surrounded by his coterie of book people contrasts with the malicious, doom-filled conflagrations set by Beatty. Granger is the author of *The Fingers in the Glove: The Proper Relationship between the Individual and Society*, a capsule statement of Bradbury's theme. Granger's pragmatic, uplifting words lead Montag from flight to the safety of the forest.

In contrast to Beatty and his Hound, Granger applies his own technological wizardry. To defeat the trail-sniffing Hound, he offers the scent of a bobcat to dissociate Montag from his former odor by applying a safer olfactory identity. Granger represents the balance that has reentered the world and which will alleviate the dark age with a new spark of intellectual light. He reveres his grandfather, a sculptor, for the humanistic spark he left behind. With cities lying in charred heaps at his back, Granger, a twenty-fourth-century Moses, guides his fellow rescuers of books toward an undisclosed promised land.

Unlike Faber, Granger has made peace with his own rebellious inklings and devised a system to indulge them – all without getting killed. He's clearly spent some time thinking about the plight of mankind and has decided this is the best way to go. It is Granger who divulges the novel's theme about life being cyclic. Mankind builds up a body of knowledge, explains Granger, and then he destroys it and falls into a dark age.

Because he's the third and final mentor figure, and because his big speech is the hallmark of Part Three, Granger gets to set the final tone for the novel. Is the reader going to come away dismally depressed, or cheerfully optimistic? For one reason or another, Granger remains hopeful. "The wonderful thing about man," says Granger, "[is that] he never gets so discouraged [...] that he gives up. [...] He knows very well it is important and worth the doing." Granger's words stay with Montag even after the ending.

An intellectual and former author, Granger is the leader of the group of hoboes that Montag meets along the tracks after fleeing from the police and Hound. Like Clarisse and Faber, Granger is a sympathetic character, taking Montag under his wing and encouraging him in his quest to remember and comprehend what he has read. Granger speaks highly of his grandfather and his belief that as long as one has contributed to the world, his or her life was important. At the end of the novel, Granger leads Montag and the other intellectuals to rebuild an improved, literate society.