

June 6, 2012

Ray Bradbury, Who Brought Mars to Earth With a Lyrical Mastery, Dies at 91

By GERALD JONAS

Ray Bradbury, a master of science fiction whose imaginative and lyrical evocations of the future reflected both the optimism and the anxieties of his own postwar America, died on Tuesday in Los Angeles. He was 91.

His death was confirmed by his agent, Michael Congdon.

By many estimations Mr. Bradbury was the writer most responsible for bringing modern science fiction into the literary mainstream. His name would appear near the top of any list of major science fiction writers of the 20th century, beside those of Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert A. Heinlein and the Polish author Stanislaw Lem. His books are still being taught in schools, where many a reader has been introduced to them half a century after they first appeared. Many readers have said Mr. Bradbury's stories fired their own imaginations.

More than eight million copies of his books have been sold in 36 languages. They include the short-story collections "The Martian Chronicles," "The Illustrated Man" and "The Golden Apples of the Sun," and the novels "Fahrenheit 451" and "Something Wicked This Way Comes."

Though none of his works won a Pulitzer Prize, Mr. Bradbury received a Pulitzer citation in 2007 "for his distinguished, prolific and deeply influential career as an unmatched author of science fiction and fantasy."

His writing career stretched across 70 years, to the last weeks of his life. The New Yorker published an autobiographical essay by Mr. Bradbury in its June 4 double issue devoted to science fiction. There he recalled his "hungry imagination" as a boy in Illinois.

"It was one frenzy after one elation after one enthusiasm after one hysteria after another," he wrote, noting, "You rarely have such fevers later in life that fill your entire day with emotion."

Mr. Bradbury sold his first story to a magazine called *Super Science Stories* in his early 20s. By 30 he had made his reputation with “*The Martian Chronicles*,” a collection of thematically linked stories published in 1950.

The book celebrated the romance of space travel while condemning the social abuses that modern technology had made possible, and its impact was immediate and lasting. Critics who had dismissed science fiction as adolescent prattle praised “*Chronicles*” as stylishly written morality tales set in a future that seemed just around the corner.

Mr. Bradbury was hardly the first writer to represent science and technology as a mixed bag of blessings and abominations. The advent of the atomic bomb in 1945 left many Americans deeply ambivalent toward science. The same “super science” that had ended World War II now appeared to threaten the very existence of civilization. Science fiction writers, who were accustomed to thinking about the role of science in society, had trenchant things to say about the nuclear threat.

But the audience for science fiction, published mostly in pulp magazines, was small and insignificant. Mr. Bradbury looked to a larger audience: the readers of mass-circulation magazines like *Mademoiselle* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. These readers had no patience for the technical jargon of the science fiction pulps. So he eliminated the jargon; he packaged his troubling speculations about the future in an appealing blend of cozy colloquialisms and poetic metaphors.

Though his books became a staple of high school and college English courses, Mr. Bradbury himself disdained formal education. He went so far as to attribute his success as a writer to his never having gone to college.

Instead, he read everything he could get his hands on: Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway. He paid homage to them in 1971 in the essay “How Instead of Being Educated in College, I Was Graduated From Libraries.” (Late in life he took an active role in fund-raising efforts for public libraries in Southern California.)

Mr. Bradbury referred to himself as an “idea writer,” by which he meant something quite different from erudite or scholarly. “I have fun with ideas; I play with them,” he said. “I’m not a serious person, and I don’t like serious people. I don’t see myself as a philosopher. That’s awfully boring.”

He added, “My goal is to entertain myself and others.”

He described his method of composition as “word association,” often triggered by a favorite line of poetry.

Mr. Bradbury’s passion for books found expression in his dystopian novel “Fahrenheit 451,” published in 1953. But he drew his primary inspiration from his childhood. He boasted that he had total recall of his earliest years, including the moment of his birth. Readers had no reason to doubt him. As for the protagonists of his stories, no matter how far they journeyed from home, they learned that they could never escape the past.

In his best stories and in his autobiographical novel, “Dandelion Wine” (1957), he gave voice to both the joys and fears of childhood, as well as its wonders.

“Dandelion Wine” begins before dawn on the first day of summer. From a window, Douglas Spaulding, 12, looks out upon his town, “covered over with darkness and at ease in bed.” He has a task to perform.

“One night each week he was allowed to leave his father, his mother, and his younger brother Tom asleep in their small house next door and run here, up the dark spiral stairs to his grandparents’ cupola,” Mr. Bradbury writes, “and in this sorcerer’s tower sleep with thunders and visions, to wake before the crystal jingle of milk bottles and perform his ritual magic.

“He stood at the open window in the dark, took a deep breath and exhaled. The streetlights, like candles on a black cake, went out. He exhaled again and again and the stars began to vanish.”

Now he begins to point his finger — “There, and there. Now over here, and here ...” — and lights come on, and the town begins to stir.

“Clock alarms tinkled faintly. The courthouse clock boomed. Birds leaped from trees like a net thrown by his hand, singing. Douglas, conducting an orchestra, pointed to the eastern sky.

“The sun began to rise.

“He folded his arms and smiled a magician’s smile. Yes, sir, he thought, everyone jumps, everyone runs when I yell. It’ll be a fine season.

“He gave the town a last snap of his fingers.

“Doors slammed open; people stepped out.

“Summer 1928 began.”

Raymond Douglas Bradbury was born Aug. 22, 1920, in Waukegan, Ill., a small city whose Norman Rockwellesque charms he later reprised in his depiction of the fictional Green Town in “Dandelion Wine” and “Something Wicked This Way Comes,” and in the fatally alluring fantasies of the astronauts in “The Martian Chronicles.” His father, Leonard, a lineman with the electric company, numbered among his ancestors a woman who was tried as a witch in Salem, Mass.

An unathletic child who suffered from bad dreams, he relished the tales of the Brothers Grimm and the Oz stories of L. Frank Baum, which his mother, the former Esther Moberg, read to him. An aunt, Neva Bradbury, took him to his first stage plays, dressed him in monster costumes for Halloween and introduced him to Poe’s stories. He discovered the science fiction pulps and began collecting the comic-strip adventures of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. The impetus to become a writer was supplied by a carnival magician named Mr. Electrico, who engaged the boy, then 12, in a conversation that touched on immortality.

In 1934 young Ray, his parents and his older brother, Leonard, moved to Los Angeles. (Another brother and a sister had died young.) Ray became a movie buff, sneaking into theaters as often as nine times a week by his count. Encouraged by a high school English teacher and the professional writers he met at the Los Angeles chapter of the Science Fiction League, he began an enduring routine of turning out at least a thousand words a day on his typewriter.

His first big success came in 1947 with the short story “Homecoming,” narrated by a boy who feels like an outsider at a family reunion of witches, vampires and werewolves because he lacks supernatural powers. The story, plucked from the pile of unsolicited manuscripts at Mademoiselle by a young editor named Truman Capote, earned Mr. Bradbury an O. Henry Award as one of the best American short stories of the year.

With 26 other stories in a similar vein, “Homecoming” appeared in Mr. Bradbury’s first book, “Dark Carnival,” published by a small specialty press in 1947. That same year he married Marguerite Susan McClure, whom he had met in a Los Angeles bookstore.

Having written himself “down out of the attic,” as he later put it, Mr. Bradbury focused on science fiction. In a burst of creativity from 1946 to 1950, he produced most of the stories later collected in “The Martian Chronicles” and “The Illustrated Man” and the novella that formed the basis of “Fahrenheit 451.”

While science fiction purists complained about Mr. Bradbury's cavalier attitude toward scientific facts — he gave his fictional Mars an impossibly breathable atmosphere — the literary establishment waxed enthusiastic. The novelist Christopher Isherwood greeted Mr. Bradbury as “a very great and unusual talent,” and one of Mr. Bradbury's personal heroes, Aldous Huxley, hailed him as a poet. In 1954, the National Institute of Arts and Letters honored Mr. Bradbury for “his contributions to American literature,” in particular the novel “Fahrenheit 451.”

“The Martian Chronicles” was pieced together from 26 stories, only a few of which were written with the book in mind. The patchwork narrative spans the years 1999 to 2026, depicting a series of expeditions to Mars and their aftermath. The native Martians, who can read minds, resist the early arrivals from Earth, but are finally no match for them and their advanced technology as the humans proceed to destroy the remains of an ancient civilization.

Parallels to the fate of American Indian cultures are pushed to the point of parody; the Martians are finally wiped out by an epidemic of chickenpox. When nuclear war destroys Earth, the descendants of the human colonists realize that they have become the Martians, with a second chance to create a just society.

“Fahrenheit 451” is perhaps his most successful book-length narrative. An indictment of authoritarianism, it portrays a book-burning America of the near future, its central character a so-called fireman, whose job is to light the bonfires. (The title refers to the temperature at which paper ignites.) Some critics compared it favorably to George Orwell's “1984.” François Truffaut adapted the book for a well-received movie in 1966 starring Oskar Werner and Julie Christie. As Mr. Bradbury's reputation grew, he found new outlets for his talents. He wrote the screenplay for John Huston's 1956 film version of “Moby-Dick,” scripts for the television series “Alfred Hitchcock Presents” and collections of poetry and plays.

In the mid-1980s he was the on-camera host of “Ray Bradbury Theater,” a cable series that featured dramatizations of his short stories.

While Mr. Bradbury championed the space program as an adventure that humanity dared not shirk, he was content to restrict his own adventures to the realm of imagination. He lived in the same house in Los Angeles for more than 50 years, rearing four daughters with his wife, Marguerite, who died in 2003. For many years he refused to travel by plane, preferring trains, and he never learned to drive.

Though the sedentary writing life appealed to him most, he was not reclusive. He developed a flair for public speaking and was widely sought after on the national lecture circuit. There he talked about his struggle to reconcile his mixed feelings about modern life, a theme that animated much of his fiction and won him a large and sympathetic audience.

And he talked about the future, perhaps his favorite subject, describing how it both attracted and repelled him, leaving him filled with apprehension and hope.