

Fahrenheit 451 Synopsis

Since 2008 young adult literature has been dominated by dystopian post-apocalyptic novels, fueled in part by the success of *The Hunger Games*. Suzanne Collins's novel led the New York Times bestseller list for more than 100 weeks, and the film version, released in 2012, even outdid the Harry Potter films in the US. Most young adults know about Katniss Everdeen and her struggle against the Capitol, which controls the country through state-sanctioned terror. *Fahrenheit 451*, published in 1953, has also had immense popularity. It has over five million copies in print and has recently climbed again to the New York Times bestseller list. Like *The Hunger Games*, it is a dystopian novel that explores what can go wrong when a government becomes too controlling of its citizens.

Fahrenheit 451 tells the story of Montag's journey of self-discovery to find meaning in life. The novel is divided into three parts, almost like the three acts of a play, all focused on Montag's growing disillusionment, awareness, and first acts of rebellion.

In part 1, "The Hearth and the Salamander," Montag is unthinking, a fireman who enjoys setting fire to books. Four things happen that shake Montag's certainty: Mildred, his wife, overdoses on pills; Clarisse, a young neighbor, asks questions that shake Montag's composure; Montag overhears Clarisse's uncle analyze the throw-away society in which they live; and Montag begins to question if firemen actually set fires in the past. Sickened when he witnesses the death of a defiant woman who refuses to give up her books, Montag feels alienated from Mildred and from the other firemen. Captain Beatty, aware that Montag has misgivings, tries to argue him into submission by recounting the history of how books became the enemy of mankind.

In part 2, "The Sieve and the Sand," Montag shares with Mildred the books he has been hiding for the past year as he tries to understand why people are willing to die rather than give up their books. Getting nowhere, Montag remembers an old man he met in the park about a year ago, an academic who recited poetry. He decides Faber might help him understand why books are important.

Once Faber is convinced Montag means him no harm, he explains that it's not the books that are so important but the ideas they contain. Books are one kind of "receptacle" for ideas which could be "housed" in anything, even the pervasive media of the present day. But, Faber explains, in the past people found ideas too bothersome. Eventually the state decided that ideas

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caused problems and so should be outlawed. Montag asks Faber to help him learn about ideas so he can make his own choices.

With his resolution and the aid of the transmitted voice of Faber in his ear, Montag challenges his wife's friends, asking them questions about their lives and what they think. Disgusted with their responses, he decides to read them a poem that makes one cry and the other furious. Going to the firehouse, Montag knows he will have a hard time dealing with the arguments of Beatty, and he is soon distraught and paralyzed by the captain's ability to answer any idea with an opposite viewpoint. However, before he can recover, an alarm sounds and the firemen are on the way to a house where books have been reported. Montag is shocked when the fire truck stops at his home.

Part 3, "Burning Bright," is the resolution of Montag's journey to knowledge. Faced with the captain's order that he set fire to his own home to clean up the mess he created, Montag complies. But when Beatty berates Montag and threatens to arrest Faber, Montag pulls the trigger of his flame thrower and sets the captain on fire. Then Montag, having just escaped the Mechanical Hound with a wound to his leg, runs to Faber's house. On the way, he plants some books at the home of a fireman and calls in an alarm, part of his plot to strike back and destroy the profession of firemen.

Faber directs Montag to the river and an escape route while the government sends in a new, more sophisticated version of the Mechanical Hound to pick up Montag's scent. When Montag makes it to the river just in time, the Hound turns back to the city and kills an innocent man as a substitute for Montag. In this way the government shows the public that there is no escape for anyone who attempts to rebel against it.

In the woods, Montag meets refugees who welcome him to their circle. They exchange what they know, each man having memorized a particular book or author. They explain their goal is to save this knowledge until the time when people are ready to hear these ideas again. The next morning, the men witness the bombing and complete annihilation of the city. In that moment Montag remembers parts of Ecclesiastes and Revelations. He realizes he is now ready to face the reality of the world and to share what he knows with others. In the end he leads the way back to the city