

From Ray, with Love

Roger Terry

To be rocketed from this world to a place so fantastic, yet so familiar that it steals your breath away, that is what it feels like to read Ray Bradbury. His words wrap around the reader, like a warm embrace from the world's greatest lover. The flow of his prose engulfs one in a wave of pure poetic pleasure. It would be dishonest, though, to hide my fears in regard to his decline in readership. In a time where illiteracy and semi-literacy runs rampant, the world needs its Papa Ray now more than ever. Words, stories can change lives, can change the world. With that in mind, let me tell you all a story about how Ray changed the life of a disabled young man, and why he should be remembered into the future as one of the most important authors in history.

From Waukegan to Walt Disney World and beyond, Ray left an indelible, crater-sized mark during his lifetime. The first time the Martian Maestro's name met my ears was in 2010, during the fall semester of freshman English. My teacher, Ms. Schneider, assigned everyone to read *Fahrenheit 451*. Before that, I chatted during lunch with the shop teacher, Mr. Elliott, who encouraged me to read Stephen King during the spring semester of my eighth-grade year.

Before picking up King's *Dreamcatcher*, it had been three years since my last book; had been a voracious booklover most of my young life, figured the gap from ages ten to thirteen would not make much difference in my reading speed, but discovered soon after that the act was more of a chore than it used to be. The brain is like any muscle, if not used... well, you get it. Took me six months to read through six-hundred pages, put the book down twice. The third time, picked it back up from the Shoals High School Library and said to myself, "You are going to finish this *goddamn* book before summer break, and that's that!" Finished with two weeks to spare. As slow as my reading was, the seed of excitement within had sprouted, and my love for the written word began to blossom again. It was during this time, at the age of fourteen, that my creative tools would begin the process of sharpening themselves for the future.

By the time Ms. Schneider's class came around, my thumbs had turned well over one-hundred pages into my second King novel, *Under the Dome*. At the time, there was no interest to read anyone but King, so I didn't. In class, all the students (those who didn't try to get away with sleeping, that is) watched Francois Truffaut's film adaptation, but even that did not secure my attention at that time. The "bonus features" interview with Ray about the creation of *Fahrenheit* did, though. A curiosity for the act of story-making had rooted itself after my bout against the shitweasels, and immediately found myself hooked on Bradbury's every word. By the end of our time with *Fahrenheit*, though, the majority of the students came to dislike it. Back then I was curious as to why, but shrugged it off and went back to *Under the Dome*.

Soon after, the high school librarian, Mrs. Lanham, presented her students with a challenge: if enough were to read through the book of her choice, that she would go about bringing in the author of said book, to answer questions. This excited me, the chance to meet my first ever author, live and in the flesh, was an opportunity too good to pass up. So, I picked up the young adult novel she chose, and read it with intense vigor, until around page eighty or so. The book was dreadful. In the end I walked back into the library, tossed the book onto the counter, and said, “As much as I would love to meet the author, I can’t finish this book. It’s awful.” My eyes spied the tagline atop the cover of the book (#1 *New York Times* Bestseller) and thought to myself, “That story was that bad, yet it was a *bestseller*? Heck, I can do better than that.” It was at that moment, at the age of fifteen, standing in front of the Shoals High School Library counter, that I chose to dedicate the rest of my life to the craft of writing, and have done so since.

Ray left my mind for a while after; his next appearance in my life came at a most somber time for the world. His passing on June 5, 2012, sucker punched me, my eyes locked on a computer screen in Mr. Dahlen’s media class. A tinge of sadness hit me at the realization that, after all this time, my eyes still had not grazed over his written word. At that moment, I promised myself not only to read his writing one day, but to acquire his works for my own private library. That same class period, my eyes and ears came across a video clip on YouTube of Ray in Santa Barbera, California, giving a speech to a bunch of would-be writers on the date of June 24, 2006: a speech that would change my life forever:

“You are supposed to be having fun. You are supposed to be *living your life*! You are here on this world to enjoy yourselves, to be in love. And not to think about it, and not to worry, and not to be unhappy. If you are unhappy, get the *hell* out of writing then! Go do something else. I have no time for you if you are going to be self-conscious. If you are going to ruin your life with *thinking*. I want you to make your life with feeling... with feeling, with loving. That’s what you’re here for. You’ve been put in the world to love the act of being alive.”

Those words have lived in my head since, and I’ve tried to live my life by them. I had been a bit unhappy for a time, though. Outside of my health issues (which we will get to soon), my first two years of college were tough—the two consecutive rounds of summer school didn’t help, either. My biggest gripe was that it felt like I no longer had the time or energy to read what my mind desired. By the end of the courses, during my second summer in 2015, it left me with two weeks until the start of fall semester. *What should I read from my library before the deadline?* My question answered itself at the sight of a stack of paperbacks, two of which I’d purchased online before coming home from campus: *Zen in the Art of Writing* and *The October Country*.

The collections mentioned previous have remained among the most influential throughout my life. The essays contained in *Zen* came and went like a fever dream. It was what my inner muse had been salivating for since the beginning of my writing journey. My great ambition back then was to win the Bram

Stoker Award for Best First Novel, and thus I became heavily interested in first projects and publications. So, the first short story picked out to read from *The October Country* (many of which were published previously in a 1944 collection titled *Dark Carnival*) was “The Lake,” Ray’s first published tale that debuted in the May 1944 issue of *Weird Tales*. By the end, it felt as if my mind had been pulled fresh from the sea itself, my imagination gasped for air, and what rushed in was loaded thick with metaphor. The remaining stories were consumed two at a time, in a pleasure-fogged daze.

After that summer, a main priority of mine became to seek out as many lectures and interviews with Ray possible. Upon listening to his loves, his passions, I discovered that we are kindred spirits in many ways. Whenever he would project his love for libraries and movies, ancient Egypt and outer space, dinosaurs and daydreaming, his words would rattle through me with the power to reduce the song of Notre Dame’s bells to a shameful jingle. The want (no, the *need*) to acquire his stories rose to an insatiable level. Yet, with limited mobility and no internet at home, books that were not readily available at the campus “bookstore” or the usual summer yard sale became hard to obtain.

Being born with the rare disability Adams-Oliver Syndrome, it has left me with a copious amount of health complications, mobility being one of them—though I can walk a little. Which, to think back now, was probably the start of my turn toward literature. The loneliness, the lack of social stimulation. Books and films rooted a love of storytelling within me years before the thought ever occurred of pursuing writing as a lifetime endeavor. It was near the end of my third and final year at Vincennes University—spring semester, 2017—when a philosophy professor friend of mine, Bruce Buchanan, took me on a trip that would solidify my love for Ray.

It was on February 3rd that I pulled myself out of bed, strapped on my leg braces, slid into my wheelchair, and rode over the old brick walkways to the Humanities building. A cool, sharp breeze at my back. My six-wheeled steed galloped through the double-doors, past my advisor Dr. Alderfer’s office, and screeched to a halt outside Bruce’s office door that was tacked with numerous sayings from philosophers past. We made the plan to go from his office to Bloomington, Indiana, to spend the day. It was near the end of my time at VU, so he wanted to take me on an adventure, to a place of unknown pastures for my eyes to watch and wander. So, I parked my wheels inside his office, and off we went. Bloomington, being *the* liberal hotspot in the cultural wasteland known as Hoosierstan, was a breath of fresh air for a growing literate.

We parked outside an old brick-and-mortar on 122 N. Walnut Street. In part due to my walking troubles, we kept the trek within a short distance. “Take it slow,” Bruce said, “we have all day.” After our seventy-four-mile drive, he recommended we stretch our legs a bit. Our first stop would become my favorite bookstore. Caveat Emptor (Latin for “let the buyer beware”) is one of the oldest bookstores in Indiana and has called the Hoosier State home since 1971.

Upon entering, eons of history raced between my eyes and ears. My ears twitched, the words and wisdoms of people long dead shouted out from their spots on the light-caramel-colored shelves. The first thing we spotted, other than the few other patrons shuffling about, was an old wooden ladder leaning against the first bookcase to our left. Not just any ladder, though, but one with its top and bottom connected to a track. A bookworm's dream locomotive.

We began our joyride at the start of the tracks, looped our way around the many bookcases, and touched the spines of every hardback and paperback possible. My fingers touched bindings coated with magic dust, some pages within as yellow and ancient as the blocks of The Great Pyramid of Giza. Everything bombarded my senses at once. I found my way to a section of smaller books, all carefully placed in zip lock bags like fine finger-sandwiches. William Shakespeare serenaded me, called out to be read, so the first to be pulled from its purgatory was an 1893 copy of The Bard's *The Comedy of Errors*. Next, my childhood called out to me, and I grabbed a pop-up book called *Return of the Jedi: Han Solo's Rescue*.

After rounding the first corner we came to a door on the other side of the room—it stood ajar. “Where does this go?” my young self inquired and was told from an aged voice behind me that that was where most of the genre books were kept. With saucer-wide eyes, I leapt into the room, Bruce following behind. The walls of the small cubby were crowded thick with horror, science fiction, fantasy. Atop the middle shelf, resting in its own little stand, was a coffee-table book titled *Bradbury: An Illustrated Life (A Journey to Far Metaphor)* by Jerry Weist. Not a book of his stories, but a great start, and thus it was plucked free like a fresh fruit from its limb.

After exiting the small space we moseyed to the middle of the room, almost bumped myself into a small, dark wooden case with glass sliding doors. “What’s in this?” The same aged voice as before replied, this time from the lips of an old man with a silver beard who sat behind the counter; his image resembled to me a Tolkien-esque gatekeeper of the printed word. His name was John. He said that it contained books not only old, but valuable beyond what my mind (and disability check) could fathom. I shriveled away, defeated, wanting so badly to own something from such a treasure chest. Instead, Bruce and I walked up to the front counter.

“Is this everything?” John asked.

I stared back at the ladder from the beginning. I noticed, then, that the whole shelf behind the ladder consisted of leather-bound books. “One second,” I said, then went to the ladder. A few rungs up out of reach, my eyes spotted a green monstrosity that seized my soul. Being as careful as possible, my feet climbed up one rung, two, three. I reached up, pulled the book from its place, the lights from above reflected off the emerald tomb's golden gilded edges, like something precious unveiled from the Ark of the Covenant or equal to. It was a 1980 Franklin Library First Edition of *The Poetry of Robert Frost*.

All of our finds were placed on the counter, paid for, then we put our books in the trunk of Bruce's car. After our sifting through Caveat Emptor, we decided to walk up the road to 211 N. Walnut and rest our legs at an Americana restaurant called the B'Town Diner. We feasted on Hometown Burgers, fries, but soon found that we could not finish. The kind, somewhat portly lady who served us let us store our leftovers in their fridge until we returned from our next destination. We thanked her, left, and walked to a small shop at the corner of 100 N. Walnut.

The small shop was called Book Corner, a bookstore opened in 1964 by James (Jimmy) and Barbera (Bobbie) Spanuth. With little money left, there was one goal firm in my mind: *Our last bookstore. Need to find some Bradbury.* It was then my eyes steadied upon a massive one-hundred-story Everyman's Library collection titled *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*. Jackpot. I purchased this copy for \$34.24, elated, more than ready to dive in and read Ray's work. After chatting with Bruce recently, and upon finding the original Book Corner receipt, all of these memories came rushing back—the receipt ink, like all things with time, has withered away to almost nothing. My hope is that this essay will help keep these memories alive long after the ink, and my memory, has faded away.

We decided not to go back for our burgers (sorry, kind lady). Instead, we walked back to Caveat Emptor, drove down to 322 E. Kirkwood Avenue, and hung out at a local joint called Soma's Coffeeshouse & Juice Bar. A hobbit-hole of a place where one can sit and enjoy the smells of various roasted beans and listen to the chatter of a few campus locals. To the left, upon entering, is a rack full of goodies and a chalkboard with a plethora of drinking options. Never having been to a coffeeshouse before, I tried to find something close to inexpensive—thus, ordering a double espresso for the first time, I expected to receive a full-sized coffee cup.

When a small shot-glass paper cup was placed before me, I felt duped. "What's this?" Bruce smiled and said to drink it, so I did. We drank down our brews, thanked the staff, left, and headed back toward our own campus. Upon exiting back out into the cool night air, the brew kicked in, and my body began to sweat out whatever it could.

It was dark by the time Bruce dropped me off at my dorm in Vigo Hall, not yet tired, the bitter brew still racing through my veins. Ecstatic about the newest additions to my library, I cracked open the Bradbury collection and read "The Fog Horn." The story follows Johnny, a three-month newbie, and the lighthouse keeper, McDunn, who talks about the mysteries that lie beneath the great ocean depths and says that before Johnny leaves tomorrow for solid land, that he has something to show him. "About this time of year... something comes to visit the lighthouse," and if Johnny thought him nuts after, he could leave. The further along in "The Fog Horn" I read, something from deep within my past began to knock at the back of my mind.

McDunn keeps secret what is supposed to show up at the lighthouse, so they wait. But, not long after, something mimics the cry from the foghorn. Then, a monster from some Jurassic past rises up from the ocean depths. The monster calls out to the lighthouse, mocks the foghorn. Upon finding out, in fact, that the noise is not coming from one of its own, the monster goes mad and begins to destroy the lighthouse. Upon reading this, something in my brain clicked.

After finishing the story, I pulled up Netflix on my television. *Pokémon*, my favorite childhood show, had just been added to their streaming library. My favorite episode as a youngster was, and still is, “Mystery at the Lighthouse.” The story is about a giant Dragonite that rises up from the ocean depths at the sound of a recording of its own voice being played back to it. The Dragonite, thinking the lighthouse was a Pokémon like itself, greets it and finds out otherwise. It gets mad, destroys the lighthouse, and walks back into the watery depths while roaring out a heartbreaking, lonesome cry.

This moment cemented Ray Bradbury to me as one of the greatest authors to ever live. He had influenced my life before I even knew who he was. Ray loved animation, and inadvertently ended up becoming inspiration for one of the greatest episodes in animated television history. Not only that, but the episode was also the thirteenth of the season, his favorite number. It goes to show that no matter in what form, great writing transcends all.

From January 28th -30th of 2022, I devoured *Fahrenheit 451* in a single weekend. I loved every page of it. After all these years, why would one go back to a book that so many of my peers disliked all those years ago? Because I came to understand that they forgot how it feels to love literature, if they ever felt that love at all. That is why everyone should read Ray Bradbury. He teaches you how to fall in love with the written word, that really great stories can do so much more than take up space on a page. Stories can change lives, alter futures. If not for Ray, this essay may not have been, but now it is.

My only regret after all these years is that I never got to write Ray a love letter; never once got to tell him just how much he meant to my life, whether I knew it at the time or not. Even though, each piece of his work is a love letter of their own. With each turn of the page, one can feel Ray smiling down from the cosmos. At the end of every story, poem, play, signed off by a well-known hand, our Papa sends all his children his best regards and well-wishes with a few simple words, scrawled on a paper-dove’s wings from another world: “From Ray, with Love!”