

# Interview with Jason Aukerman

*Director of the Ray Bradbury Center*

*“The mission of the Bradbury Center is to fully document, preserve, and provide public access to its large and diverse collection of Space-Age visionary author Ray Bradbury’s literary works, art, artifacts, personal office, personal library, correspondence, typescripts, manuscripts, photographs, mementoes, audiovisual materials and juvenilia; to enable visiting scholars and students to conduct research; to continue its outreach programming in the Indianapolis community, throughout Indiana, nationally, and internationally, with an emphasis on reaching high school teachers, students, and librarians; and to continue publishing our annual scholarly journal The New Ray Bradbury Review.”*

—Ray Bradbury Center Website (<https://liberalarts.iupui.edu/centers/bradbury-center/>)

**The Ray Bradbury Center, located in IUPUI’s Cavanaugh Hall, memorializes the work of the influential Midwestern-born author. To learn more about the Ray Bradbury Center and Ray Bradbury’s writing influence, the Managing Editors of *genesis* (Shannon Kucaj and Monica Simmons) interviewed Jason Aukerman.**



Recreation of Bradbury’s office, featuring artifacts from his life, constructed in the Bradbury Center.

***When did you first hear about Bradbury? What was the first work of his that you read?***

I don't remember when I first heard about Ray Bradbury, but I was "aware of his work" by the time I graduated from college. *Fahrenheit 451* was one of the first works I read after graduating with an English degree. Bradbury became prominent in my life a few years later when I taught my first college English course. Most English professors get their start teaching Freshmen Composition, and I was no different. I taught in a computer lab, and my students spent a lot of time writing and workshoping. After a few weeks, I sensed a growing fog of skepticism emanating from my students. (I was dealing with an awful case of impostor syndrome.) So, I tried to find some affirmation for my approach, and I came across a video clip of Ray Bradbury. He was reflecting on his career and the importance of writing persistently. He talked about how he started writing daily at age 12, but it wasn't until he wrote a short story called "The Lake" at age 22 that he felt he'd found his voice as a writer. The next day, I played that video clip for my students, and I read "The Lake" in class. Bradbury has been a vital part of my teaching curriculum ever since.

***What's your favorite Bradbury fact—something we don't know about him?***

Bradbury insisted, throughout his life, that he could vividly remember his own birth. Most people dismissed this for obvious reasons. As an adult, he learned that he was a "ten-month baby"—meaning that he was born almost an entire month after his due date. From that point on, he cited that as evidence for this memory—he claimed that because he was born later than anticipated, his brain was more fully developed than a typical newborn's.



***How would you describe Bradbury's writing style?***

Bradbury's writing style is highly imaginative, a bit eccentric, and thoroughly charming. He infuses his narratives with prose poems and rich metaphors.



***What are the major themes that Bradbury wrote about? What was he concerned about? Does this show in his work?***

Bradbury, like many science fiction authors, imagines possible futures in his stories. Sometimes the things in these stories come to fruition. (Take space travel, wireless phones, and smart watches as obvious examples.) Ray Bradbury imagined wall-size television screens and 24-hour bank services, and later in life people often asked him “How’d you do it? How were you able to predict the future?” Bradbury’s response was simple—“my goal was never to predict the future. My hope was to prevent certain unsavory futures from happening.”

Bradbury was a lifelong champion of public libraries and literacy, and his love for books is apparent in *Fahrenheit 451*, his classic admonitory novel of authoritarian government overreach and cultural devaluing of literacy, culminating in censorship and book burning.

He was also concerned about the environment and colonization. Author Ken Crossen described Bradbury as “the voice of the poet raised against the mechanization of mankind...to him there is only a difference of degree between the atom bomb and [people] tossing beer cans into Martian canals. One destroys the whole [person]; the other indicates that [the person] is already destroyed.”<sup>1</sup>

Ray Bradbury’s thematic content is wide-ranging, but for me, his most poignant and important works deal with themes of othering and isolation—“Homecoming,” “The Foghorn,” “The Dwarf,” “The Scythe,” “The Exiles,”

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1           Kendell Foster Crossen, “Review: The Golden Apples of the Sun,” *Future Science Fiction*, November 1953.

“Usher II” and many others. I think his motivation for writing about these things can be summed up when he was interviewed for a documentary on Lon Chaney—Ray Bradbury’s silent film idol: “[*Lon Chaney*] was someone who acted out our psyches. He somehow got into the shadows inside our bodies; he was able to nail down some of our secret fears and put them on-screen. The history of Lon Chaney is the history of unrequited loves. He brings that part of you out into the open, because you fear that you are not loved, you fear that you never will be loved, you fear there is some part of you that’s grotesque, that the world will turn away from.” Lon Chaney did this on the silver screen. Bradbury accomplished it through the power of the written word.

### ***How did Bradbury impact the world of writing/art and beyond?***

How much space do I have?

Ray Bradbury’s career spanned seven decades and intersected an impressively broad spectrum of American cultural history. He was deeply connected with Hollywood, where his stories and books were adapted for feature films, radio, television, and stage theater production. He defended public libraries and First Amendment rights and became one of the most prominent public advocates for space exploration. While he is most well-known for his fiction, having published more than four hundred stories and twenty-seven book-length works, he also engaged real-world issues in his writing, including racial and political intolerance, freedom of the imagination, the threat of nuclear war, the need to fund the American Space program, and the vital importance of literacy.

Nearly all of his books remain popular today; *Fahrenheit 451* remains a best seller after nearly seven decades in print. In 2006, *Fahrenheit 451* became a core reading selection of the National Endowment for the Arts’ Big Read program. Other Bradbury works, particularly his short stories, have been published in over one thousand literary anthologies featured in the curriculum of schools throughout the United States.

Bradbury used his literary craft to probe the human condition, often bypassing the technological terrain of more traditional “hard science fiction” narratives. His unconventional approach to genre fiction, shirking the formulas used by his contemporaries when writing for pulp fiction magazines, propelled Ray Bradbury to new heights as he became a catalyst for bringing the often-marginalized science fiction genre into the literary mainstream. Bradbury also reached international acclaim for his ability to reimagine the American Gothic tradition and the dark fantastic. Horror writers from Stephen King and Peter Straub to Clive Barker, Neil Gaiman, and Dan Chaon were particularly influenced by Bradbury’s ability to refashion gothic tale settings in American small towns and suburbs. Other notable authors such as Margaret Atwood, Steven Barnes, Charles Johnson, Michael Chabon, and the recent two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Colson

Whitehead were all inspired by Bradbury's imagination, style, and ability to cleverly depict human encounters with the unknown.

Bradbury's influence, however, is not limited to the North American continent. He is one of the most widely translated authors in the world, ranging from various editions in French, German, Italian, and Spanish to many non-western languages including Arabic, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and Thai. Bradbury's French readers were particularly drawn to his surreal short fiction, and he was eventually awarded the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Commandeur) Medal in 2007. Perhaps the most surprising and most indicative emblems of Bradbury's international influence are the many Russian awards that he received throughout the twentieth century, particularly his 2007 Olympus Award from the Russian Academy of Sciences. Ray Bradbury, writing at the height of McCarthyism, when Cold War tensions haunted nearly every aspect of civilian life in the U. S., was read by Russians and Americans alike. His vision for space exploration transcended national boundaries, imagining a widespread, collaborative human endeavor to the point that it was appreciated by archrivals. Perhaps this point is most profoundly illustrated in the details of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's June 1990 visit to the United States. Gorbachev invited his family's two favorite authors, Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury, to a state luncheon given at the Russian Embassy in Washington, D. C.<sup>2</sup>

Bradbury's contributions as a space-age visionary expanded his influence into the next frontier. During the 1960s, Bradbury emerged on an international level as one of the most popular and dynamic advocates for space exploration. His award-winning articles for *Life* magazine excited millions of readers about humanity's potential to reach the stars, and he became a frequent speaker at Caltech and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.<sup>3</sup> As the space program began to focus on unmanned exploration after the Apollo missions, Bradbury continued his devoted support of the space program through continued interactions with Jet Propulsion Laboratory teams as well as the Caltech faculty who played vital roles in the Mariner 9 orbital photographic surveys of Mars; the Viking Mars landings; the Voyager missions to Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune; the Mars Odyssey's thermal imaging program; and the first Mars rovers—Spirit and Opportunity. While dozens of artifacts and mementos commemorating Bradbury's prolonged engagement with these space exploration programs are housed in the Ray Bradbury Center, his broad influence is also effected in numerous global interplanetary achievements. For example, the Phoenix Mars Lander brought a digitized copy of Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* to the red planet where it remains at the time of this writing. On August

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2 Bob Remington, "Ray Bradbury," *Edmonton Journal*; Eller, *Bradbury Beyond Apollo*, pp. 184–185.

3 CoconutScienceLab, *Ray Bradbury - An Inspiration, Visits JPL | NASA Mars Rover Program Science Fiction HD*, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-h7eiGA85ws>.

22, 2012, just ten weeks after Bradbury's passing, the rover Curiosity's touchdown point on Mars was re-named "Bradbury Landing."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, scientists and astronauts who came of age reading Bradbury's works have named a moon crater, an asteroid, and several Martian terrain features in his honor.

Bradbury's science fiction stories approached space travel with a sense of childlike wonder, and that sense of wonder was imparted to many of his readers. His dreams of space became their dreams, and this inspiring influence eventually led to friendships with astronauts Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin (Apollo 11), Alan Bean (Apollo 12), David Scott (Apollo 9 and 15), and Harrison Schmidt (Apollo 17), as well as such Space Age luminaries as writer Arthur C. Clarke, astronomer Carl Sagan, and Jet Propulsion Laboratory director Bruce Murray.

It is certainly possible (though difficult) to overstate Bradbury's importance as a twentieth century American writer, but it is impossible to deny his wide-ranging cultural significance. Scholars of twentieth century American film, history, space exploration, television, and literature cannot *broadly* examine what was going on in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century without acknowledging, on some level, Bradbury's pervasive influence.



### ***What got you started in the Ray Bradbury Center (RBC)?***

That is a long story. Let's just say that it was a series of extremely fortunate events. I still can't believe that I get to do what I do for a living.

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4 Alison Flood, "Ray Bradbury's Influence on Our Culture Was Transformative, Says Barack Obama," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2012, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/07/ray-bradbury-influence-barack-obama>; Dwayne Brown and Steve Cole, "NASA Mars Rover Begins Driving at Bradbury Landing," Press Releases, NASA, August 22, 2012, [https://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2012/aug/HQ\\_12-292\\_Mars\\_Bradbury\\_Landing.html](https://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2012/aug/HQ_12-292_Mars_Bradbury_Landing.html).

***What does the RBC do? How does RBC keep Bradbury's memory alive today?***

Dr. Jon Eller, the world's foremost scholar on Ray Bradbury, articulated four thematic principles and causes inextricably linked to Bradbury's legacy:

1) intellectual and creative freedom: this includes matters pertaining to free speech, freedom of the imagination, and the freedom of human beings to pursue the things they love.

2) looking to the stars for the future of humanity: Bradbury was one of the primary visionaries of the Space Age. His stories about human beings reaching other planets and exploring new worlds are rooted in a childlike wonder at the combined beauties and terrors of the universe. His stories of space travel touched many astronauts, planetary scientists, astrophysicists, and astronomers as they determined their careers, and throughout the 1960s and beyond, his dreams of space and the excitement for the space program that he communicated in award winning articles caught the collective imagination of the American public. His dreams became our dreams.

3) advocacy for public libraries: knowledge should be free and accessible to everyone regardless of race, creed, social status, class, or gender.

4) celebration of the precious gift of literacy: the ability to read, to encounter magnificent stories, and to interact with the thoughts and ideas of some of the most interesting figures in history is a gift. It should be celebrated and put to good use. Literacy is the primary harbinger of the past, present, and future of all culture in developed countries.

While all four of these ideas remain relevant in the twenty-first century, Bradbury's passion for literacy and his firm belief that people should be able to engage in literacy regardless of class and social standing is especially pertinent, but the primary audience for these items exists outside of a university context. For humanities centers such as the Bradbury Center, it is imperative that we extend beyond the ivory tower of academia and provide rich programming for everyone, not just scholars. The Ray Bradbury Center can use its resources to advance Bradbury's legacy in the Indianapolis area and beyond. Limited resources, however—both in terms of finances and time constraints on employees—currently prevent the Center from excelling in any one of these four initiatives. For this reason, we have narrowed the focus to one of these four themes: literacy development in people of all ages and skill levels and public access to libraries so that everyone can explore and develop his/her personal literacy.

***What do you think is the coolest item in the RBC?***

Ray Bradbury's original writer's desk—the desk he used for the early part of his career. The stories from *The October Country*, *The Illustrated Man*, *The Martian Chronicles* and many others were typed right there at this desk.



Bradbury working at his desk



Bradbury's original desk (now featured in the Ray Bradbury Center)

*Our thanks to the Bradbury Center for the photographs featured throughout this interview.*