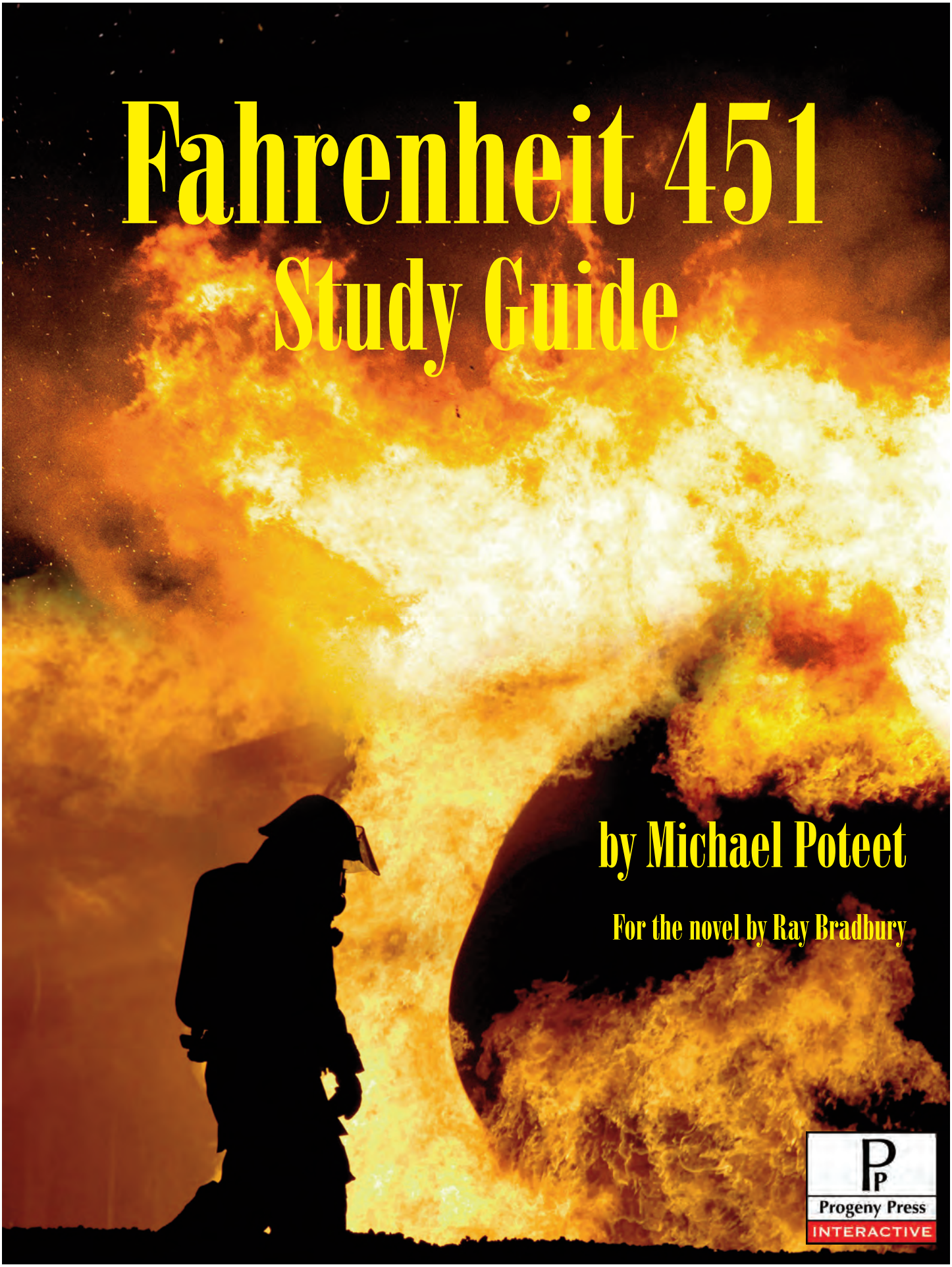
Fahrenheit 451
Study Guide



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For the novel by Ray Bradbury

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INTERACTIVE

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Synopsis

Guy Montag, a fireman of the future, is responsible for starting fires, not stopping them. In his society, books have been banned—all books, save the firemen's own rule books, which contain the ominous order, "Burn everything." Montag finds pleasure in enforcing the *status quo*—which is that pleasure is the ultimate good, and intellectual pursuits are bad because they breed dissatisfaction and superiority—until one autumn evening when a teenage neighbor, Clarisse McClellan, asks him a simple, haunting question: "Are you happy?"

The question takes on greater urgency when Montag discovers that his wife Mildred has overdosed on pills in a suicide attempt. After she is perfunctorily and mechanically revived by technicians, she has no memory of her actions and resumes her distraction-filled days as though nothing has happened. She continues to insist she is happy, spending her time in the ironically named "living room" with her televised, life-sized "family" entertaining her from three wall-sized screens.

The final shock to Montag's complacency occurs when he and his fellow firemen respond to an alarm at 11 North Elm Street, where a woman possesses a contraband library. Rather than passively submit to the firemen's kerosene, *she* lights the match that ignites her books and herself. As a result of this self-immolation, Montag clearly sees a new truth: "There must be something in books, things we can't imagine. . . ." And perhaps, he thinks, that something can heal not only his life and his marriage, but also his happiness-hunting society.

And so Montag begins to read forbidden books that *he* has hidden in *his* home, putting his career and life in danger. With the help of Faber, a former professor of literature, Montag seeks a way to help—or force—his society to remember what it has forgotten. With Fire Captain Beatty, the firemen, and their lethal Mechanical Hound in pursuit of him, Montag races against time to save a society unaware that it is heading toward self-destruction.

Part Two: "The Sieve and the Sand"
Section 2

Analysis:

1. Identify the source of these words Montag reads aloud: "That favourite subject, Myself." How do Montag and Mildred's differing reactions to this quote develop their characters?

2. Faber alludes to the myth of Hercules and Antaeus. Look up Antaeus and Hercules. How does that story apply to the society of *Fahrenheit 451*? To what extent do you think it applies to your society today?

3. In literature, a *foil* is an object or character who, by contrast, calls attention to or enhances the traits and qualities of another object or character. How might Faber and Montag be considered foils to each other in Part Two? Support your response with specific references to the text.

4. Faber reads the book of Job to Montag "so [Montag] can remember." What does Montag want to remember, and how might Job be a text that will help him remember it? What significance do you see in the fact that Bradbury chose to have Faber read this biblical book in particular?

5. What does the conversation between Mildred and her friends tell us about the society of *Fahrenheit 451*? Support your answer with specific references to the text.

6. Research and read in full the poem Montag reads aloud to Mildred and her friends. Why do you think Bradbury has chosen to place this poem in Montag's mouth? What relevance do both it and its author have to the characters and context of *Fahrenheit 451*?

Dig Deeper:

7. Near the beginning of Part Two, Mildred protests to Montag, "Why should I read? What for?" How would you answer that question for yourself?

Why should Christians read the Bible? When responding, consider Nehemiah 8:1–10; Psalm 119:9–11, 105; John 20:31; Romans 15:4; and 2 Timothy 3:16–17.

8. Early in Part Two, Montag swears, using the name of Jesus and God as an expletive. Why do you think people do this? *Is* swearing wrong? When someone swears, should we stop listening to that person, or if it is in a book, should we stop reading that book? Why?

   Read 1 Corinthians 5:9–13; Philippians 4:8. How do these verses say we, as Christians, should conduct ourselves? How should we deal with un-Christ-like behavior in non-Christians? How should we deal with it in Christians? How do you apply this to hearing a person swear or reading a book that contains swear words?

9. At one point, Mildred angrily asks Montag, "Who's more important, me or that Bible?" Read Matthew 10:34–39 and Mark 7:9–13. How might Jesus' words bear on Mildred's question?

17. Faber calls himself a coward because he did not speak up on behalf of those who were persecuted for being intellectuals: "I'm one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the 'guilty,' but I did not speak and thus became guilty myself." Read Esther 4:6–16; Job 29:11–17; Psalm 72:1–4, 12–15; Matthew 25:41–46; and Luke 16:19–25. What do these passages teach about opportunities and obligations to speak "up and out," as Faber says, on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves? How can you follow these teachings?

18. Faber critiques his society for being "rootless," for giving up the rich nourishment once found (among other places) in books. The society of *Fahrenheit 451* suffers from a collective amnesia. George Santayana wrote in *The Life of Reason* (Vol. 1, 1905), "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Read Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 8:10–20; Psalm 106:6–15; Jeremiah 6:16–19; John 14:25–26; Acts 2:42; 2 Peter 1:12–15; and Revelation 2:2:4–5. What do these texts teach about the importance of memory, both personal and corporate, in the life of faith? How do such passages as Isaiah 43:16–21 and 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 help define faithful remembering?

Optional Activities:

1. Find and support an organized effort to give Bibles to those who do not have them, or plan a project to support Bible translation efforts. Organizations include International Bible Society (`www.ibs.org`); American Bible Society (`www.americanbible.org`); Wycliffe Bible Translators (`www.wycliffe.org`); The Gideons International (`www.gideons.org`); or research your own church's or denomination's resources.

Jeremiah 6); when they remember, they can receive and experience salvation (Revelation 2). The Holy Spirit helps us remember Jesus' teachings (John 14), as do our spiritual leaders (2 Peter 1), and Christians follow the discipline of reading and reflecting on the Scriptures together (Acts 2:42). Faithful remembering, however, "extends far beyond nostalgic recall . . . reverence for the past is merged with relevance in the present," as 1 Corinthians 11's description of the Lord's Supper demonstrates. [Ryken, *et al.,* 702–03] The Greek word *anamnesis* (vv. 24, 25), in fact, carries overtones of bringing what is remembered from the past into the present. Faithful memory is ultimately oriented to the future, so that, through Isaiah, God can go so far as to say, "Forget the former things . . ." (43:18). God's people are not to remember the past for its own sake, but to gain from it nourishment for the present and sustaining hope for the future.

Part Three: "Burning Bright" Section 1

Vocabulary:

1. aesthetic; 2. luminous, limned, smouldering; 3. pedants, prattle, incessantly; 4. dilate; 5. squanders; 6. scythe, convolutions; 7. valise; 8. litterateur

Elements of Literature:

Symbolism:

1. Interpretations may vary; accept reasonable responses supported by specific reference to the text. Generally speaking, Bradbury invests fire in Part Three, and throughout the book, with two opposite meanings: the power to create and the power to destroy. Fire holds these contradictory meanings together in a single image. For example, when Montag burns his house as Part Three begins, he is destroying: he literally burns his house, but, symbolically, he burns his old life as well (all evidence of his relationship with Mildred; Captain Beatty). As Part Three ends, however, readers see fire as the power to create: the ragtag group of "rememberers" gathers around a fire that "was not burning" but "was warming." The fire here symbolizes the light of knowledge these men hope to bring to their world.

2. Interpretations may vary. The war's symbolic significance could be assessed from several angles, one of which is the fact that it breaks out shortly after the residents of the city have been absorbed in watching the Mechanical Hound's pursuit of Montag; as Granger says, "And the war's begun . . . and the city is there, all wrapped up in its own coat of a thousand colors"—in this context, the allusion may be to dreaming, not as a means of divine revelation (as in Joseph's story in Genesis) but in dreaming as the opposite of reality, or it may be to a perceived "favored son" status in which Americans believe they are more deserving than the rest of the world. As we have repeatedly seen, the culture of the novel is based on dreams, illusion, and fantasy. The war is a sudden intrusion from the outside, even though it has been building throughout the novel. We do not know the causes for it, but that narrative choice is significant, because neither do the characters in the novel. The war, then, could symbolize judgment on the novel's society; indeed, in Part Three, the narrator suggests it be assigned this meaning: "Montag saw the flirt of a great metal fist over the far city, and he knew the scream of the jets that would follow, and say, after the deed, *disintegrate, leave no stone on another, perish. Die.*" The text alludes to Jesus' prediction of the fate of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Matt. 24:2 and parallels). This meaning of the war has been hinted at earlier in the book—for example, when Montag asks Mildred if their society's self-absorbed isolation and the rest of the world's resentment