

## A Tableful of Twinkies

Ray Bradbury is America's Official Science Fiction Writer, the one most likely to be trotted out on state occasions to give a salute to, as he puts it, "our wild future in space." In 1964 he was hired to "conceptualize" the area of the U.S. World's Fair Pavilion devoted to the Future. From there he went on "to help plan the dreams that went into Spaceship Earth," the latest Disney fairground now under construction. Recently a film clip of the author was the delegate for science fiction at the first TABA Awards ceremony.

To those familiar with the field Bradbury's figurehead status may seem hard to account for, if only because, as he himself notes, so small a part of his output may be called science fiction. If the flagbearer's role were to be assigned to the Oldest Veteran, then by rights Jack Williamson should lead the parade. If a poll of sf readers were to be taken, top honors would probably go to Robert Heinlein. Even the art of self-promotion cannot account for Bradbury's eminence, for Isaac Asimov has been beating the drum of his own reputation with more vigor and persistence for decades. Yet for brand-name recognition Bradbury has them all licked.

Could the answer be sheer literary excellence? No. Only readers who would profess Rod McKuen to be America's greatest poet, or Kahlil Gibran its noblest philosopher, could commend unblushingly Bradbury's stories as literature. If there is any difference between art and kitsch, between steak and baloney, into which category would you place the following prose specimen?

There are a million small towns like this all over the world. Each as dark, as lonely, each as removed, as full of shuddering and wonder. The reedy playing of minor key violins is the small towns' music, with no lights but many shadows. Oh the vast swelling loneliness of them. The secret damp ravines of them. Life is a horror lived in them at night, when at all sides sanity, marriage, children, happiness, is threatened by an ogre called Death.

That comes from "The Night," the first of one hundred tales collected in *The Stories of Ray Bradbury*. Though published early in his career (1946),

Review of *The Stories of Ray Bradbury: 100 of His Most Celebrated Tales*.

the vein of schmaltz evident in “The Night” recurs in Bradbury’s work as regularly as he reaches for the unattainable or addresses Eternity on a one-to-one basis—i.e., in at least half his stories. Early and late are meaningless distinctions in his output. Indeed, the secret of his success may well be that, like Peter Pan, he won’t grow up. What’s more, he knows it:

I was not embarrassed at circuses. Some people are. Circuses are loud, vulgar, and smell in the sun. By the time many people are fourteen or fifteen, they have been divested of their loves, their ancient and intuitive tastes, one by one, until when they reach maturity there is no fun left, no zest, no gusto, no flavor. Others have criticized, and they have criticized themselves, into embarrassment.

There’s the choice—love Ray Bradbury, out there beyond embarrassment, or be enrolled among these loveless, zestless critics who never go to the circus. My own experience suggests other possibilities. I’ve been to the circus from time to time, invariably enjoyed the show, gasped, applauded, and my ancient and intuitive taste tells me that Ray Bradbury’s stories are meretricious more often than not. Because he’s risked being loud, vulgar, and smelly? No, because his imagination so regularly gets mired in genteel gush and self-pity, because environing clichés have made him nearly oblivious to new data from any source, and because as a writer he’s a slop.

Consider this description (from “The Night”): “You smell lilacs in blossom; fallen apples lying crushed and odorous in the deep grass.” Ordinarily apples don’t fall when lilacs blossom, but in Bradbury’s stories it’s always Anymonth in Everywhereville. His dry-ice machine covers the bare stage of his story with a fog of breathy approximations. He means to be evocative and incantatory; he achieves vagueness and prolixity.

Perhaps it is elitist, these days, to discuss the prose style of any very popular writer. A readership in the millions proves that some sort of message is getting through. At a symposium of secondary school teachers I was assured that no sf writer is so teachable as Bradbury: even the least skilled readers are able to turn his sentences into pictures in their heads. Inattentive, artless, and very young readers are probably better able to construct agreeable daydreams out of Bradbury’s approximative prose than if they were required to exercise their reading muscles more strenuously.

The Defense might argue that broad outlines, bright colors, and stereotypical characters don’t preclude the Possibility of art, or at least of well-engineered amusement. Walt Disney and Norman Rockwell have endeared themselves to large audiences by such means. Indeed, there are

other points of comparison even more pertinent. Like Disney, Bradbury has a knack for taming and sanitizing fairy tales and myths so that even fauns and centaurs may be welcomed into the nursery. Like Rockwell, Bradbury celebrates the virtues and flavors of an idyllic, small-town American Way of Life, the myth on which a thousand suburbs have been founded. Myths can serve various purposes: they can be decorative, a kind of literary Fourth of July bunting (as in Bradbury's "A Scent of Sasparilla" [sic]); they can be obfuscatory, a stop-gap lie to tell children before they're ready for the truth (Bradbury's tales of life in funny, old, warmhearted Mexico achieve this purpose); or they can order complex emotional experience in the manner so well described by Bruno Bettelheim in his study of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*. Some of Bradbury's most memorable tales achieve this last and largest purpose of mythmaking—simple fictional analogues of matters usually not referred to—fear of death or of one's own infantile rage—offering symbolically effective ways of thinking about the unthinkable.

Even as mythmaker, however, Bradbury's failures outnumber his successes. He summons spirits from the vasty deep, but they don't come. "The Black Ferris," one of only six stories collected for the first time in this volume, is Bradbury at his worst, at once portentous and trivializing, overwrought and twee. (The author himself thought so much of it that it became the basis of his novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.)

"The Black Ferris" begins with a great gust from the fog machine—"The carnival had come to town like an October wind, like a dark bat flying over the cold lake, bones rattling in the night, mourning, sighing, whispering up the tents in the dark rain"—and goes on to recount how two small boys, Peter and Hank, discover that Mr. Cooger, the thirty-five-year-old manager of the visiting carnival, has transformed himself into the "li'l orphan boy" who has been taken into the household of poor rich Mrs. Foley. He does this by riding the black Ferris of the title twenty-five times in reverse. The two boys immediately apprehend the purpose of this imposture and go to Mrs. Foley to warn her:

"He's from the carnival, and he ain't a boy, he's a man, and he's planning on living with you until he finds where your money is and then run off with it some night, and people will look for him but because they'll be looking for a little ten-year-old boy they won't recognize him when he walks by a thirty-five-year-old man, named Mr. Cooger!"

Mrs. Foley refuses to heed this word to the wise, and there's nothing our little heroes can do but chase the false orphan back to the carnival. Too

late to prevent him from getting back into the time-defying Ferris, they assault the blind hunchback at the controls. The Ferris spins, unchecked, until . . . what do you think?

“Look,” everybody said.

The policeman turned and the carnival people turned and the fishermen turned and they all looked at the occupant in the black-painted seat at the bottom of the ride. The wind touched and moved the black wooden seat in a gentle rocking rhythm, crooning over the occupant in the dim carnival light.

A skeleton sat there, a paper bag of money in its hands, a brown derby hat on its head.

If that tickles your sense of wonder, then there are ninety-nine other stories in the book just as good or even better. (To my mind, any halfway bright eleven-year-old could do as well, given twenty years to practice.) There can be charm in art of such systematically false naivete, and some few writers have managed to have it both ways, writing stories that are equally amusing to grown-ups and exciting for children: Hans Christian Andersen, A. A. Milne, Maurice Sendak. But Bradbury is not in their league. His sense of humor doesn't operate on both sides of the generation gap; his horrors are redolent of Halloween costumery; his sentimentality cloy; his sermons are intrusive and schoolmarmish; he is uninformed and undisciplined. He is an artist only in the sense that he is not a hydraulic engineer.

The fact remains that for many adults these stories can serve as a direct link back to their prematurely buried eleven-year-old selves and that kids will respond (as I did, back when) to their appeal quite as though they were the genuine articles, a whole buffet of Hostess Twinkies, candy corn, and strawberry Kool-Aid, all gleaming, like Mars itself, with the eerie glow of Red Dye Number 2.