Ray Bradbury's:
How, Instead of Being Libraries or Thoughts

I have also written a lot of poetry about libraries and librarians, and one poem called "These Unsparked Flints, These Uncut Gravestone Brides" is about all the librarians I grew up with when I was nine to fourteen years old in Waukeegan, Illinois. All these librarians were a thousand years old, and they never got any younger during all the time I knew them. I've noticed that librarians are much nicer to look at these days than the ones that I remember. Librarians today are not to take offense. The poem has nothing to do with you.

These Unsparked Flints,
These Uncut Gravestone Brides

The ladies in the libraries
Do not go home at night;
Stand watch, be sure, just wait
Outside the mellow place at nine
Crouched down in bush and elderberry vine,
Look in through windows tall
Where virgin brides go quiet as the dust
By shelves where titles ranked, gold-bright as foxes' eyes,
Glint sparks of lust.
Among the million dead and million more to perish
These unsparked flints, these uncut gravestone brides
Do nourish silence, and their tread
Is stuff of moss and downfell rust.
They do not touch the floor, encircling the dark,
To one-by-one pull strings to snatch the light,
Extinguish and move on to next and snatch again,
Keys at their waists ajingle in a gentle rain,
Like skaters in a summer dream,
Their spectacles agleam beneath the greenglass shades.
The smell of hyacinth pervades where they have been
And goes before as harbinger of youngness kept
Clasp-corseted in Iron Maiden flesh.
Where air was warm and bounteous on the sill
In passing, such as these give vapors and the chill
To airs that touch and move aside.
They hide themselves a moment in the stacks
To shove long needles murderous in their hair.

"These Unsparked Flints, These Uncut Gravestone Brides" copyright 1970 by Ray Bradbury.
Educated in College, I Was Graduated from
from a Chap Who Landed on the Moon in 1932

And look without seeing at stark images in mirror,
unaware;
Both see and seen the Queen of Iceland’s daughter,
A blind stare, a strange drift of unshaped snow.
Then, at the door they go, give last looks ‘round the shop
Where Time is vended in the books,
Where skin prolapses from the dinosaur,
Then wheel again to knife the air, go out and down the street
To places no one knows?
They do not go.
Their coats all buttoned tight,
Their spectacles fresh-washed, they spin to call:
“Is anybody there?”
In hopes that some deep terrifying voice of man
Might some night soon reply, “Ah, yes.”
Their ringless fingers tremble on their dress.
They hold their breath, their souls, they wait.
Then reach up for the last light-string and yank.
The night drops down.
But in the instant of eclipse
See them snap-close-clench up themselves like
Ancient paper flowers of Japan.
A wind from basements dank and attics desert-dry
Breathes up, breathes down, the air,
These scentless flowers shower everywhere!
And where before the brittle women stood,
Some vagrant tattered crepes now tap the floor.
As for the rest, the lustful books on shelves gape wide
And into these the funeral-flower souls now rattle,
Tickle, rustle, hide, and, hiding, rest;
Each to its age, each to its own and proper nest.
This maid to Greece and Rape of the Sabines,
That one to Child’s Crusade
Where knights shuck off their stuffs
To bed the sixteenth summer maid;
The third and last cold statue turned to farewell summer’s dust
Flies up the Transylvania height
And welcomes lust by showing it her neck
And trading randy bite for bite.
All, all turned bookmarks! All slipped in dreadful books
Where loving makes a din!
Ten times as loud as loving in the world beyond the shelves,
Tucked in warm dark the bookmark maidens
Feel themselves crushed and beauteously mangled,
Scream and gibber all the night,
Only swooning down to dreaming sleep at dawn,
Smiles crept about their mouths,
Squashed flat ‘twixt Robin and his nimble nibbling men.
And Arthur who, if thanked,
Will pull Excalibur from them at breakfast-time,
And so be King, his weapon free of stone
That held it fast, all hungry for a fight.

Such screams! Such gladsome moans of happiness!
List, listen! by the library.
But, soft . . . the books, gummed shut, do muffle it.
The maids all night each night are maids no more.
Come back at noon.
And see the ancient cronies three, aswoon.
All somewhat tipsy-drunk and tenterhooked with memory
There propped up at desk as if the sun were still the moon.

Give smile.
Give book.
Go off, but never ask, for you will never know
Where, where O where at night
These long lost cold-chipped marble ladies go.
Ask the silence,
Linger on a while
But all you’ll have for answer
Is a sad remembrance smile
They’ll quickly cover with a Kleenex, wipe away.

So, old again and lonely and unsquashed
And ringless, pale, and breathing out ice
They face the heatless noon,
The sunless hours of day,
Reckon your question,
Recommend which files,
And give virginal advice.

You see, the poem is only about the librarians
I grew up with as a boy. Right?

A Child of Libraries
I am indeed a child of libraries. I never made it
to college. I got out of Los Angeles High School
better get a job selling newspapers on a street corner," which I did. I sold papers for three or four years at the corner of Olympic and Norton, and got myself started as a writer until I was making twenty dollars a week by writing. Then I was able to quit selling newspapers.

In the meantime, I spent almost every night either at the main library or at various other libraries around town. My favorite pastime was wandering around in those libraries, just taking books off the shelves and falling in love with them or not falling in love with them, and sitting around or standing around the library and writing stories on those little bits of blank paper they have for reference notes. I was fairly poor, and all those nice little reference notes were there, so I'd write half a short story on those, and then take a stack of them home and type it all up.

There was something about the library that absolutely revved me up constantly. I loved being there; I still love going as much as I did. I don't make it as often, maybe only once a week nowadays. But I am in bookstores every day of my life, and one of the greatest pleasures of my life the last fifteen years has been being able to buy books. I think that's what money is for. What an honorable way to spend money: buying books. In the old days, of course, I couldn't afford them. Occasionally, I stole books. That's a dreadful thing to say, but I think that it is rather an honorable profession, too. You're stealing knowledge. But I was very careful to steal them back onto the shelves later. I simply borrowed them. Sometimes I'd go to the nearest magazine rack at the drugstore, and they'd have a copy of Astounding Stories that I wanted to read, which cost twenty-five cents. I simply didn't have it. So I'd steal the magazine, take it home, read it, come back the next day, and when they weren't looking, put it back on the rack. I got caught once putting it back. The guy didn't know what to do with me. You see, there's no law that covers putting something back on a rack. This gives you some idea of my background, and how much I love books.

A Burner of Ideas

All the ideas you find in my books are based

in 1938. I knew I wanted to be a writer. I had tentative plans to go to college and take drama, and then I thought it all over and said to myself, "Why are you going to college, Ray?" and the answer was, "Girls." That's a very nice reason, but it doesn't make sense as far as learning drama or writing goes, so I said "I think you'd

The illustrations in this article are by Joe Mugnaini, reprinted from The October Country by Ray Bradbury, courtesy of Ballantine Books.
upon a little piece of something I saw in our society. For instance, twenty years ago, Senator Joseph McCarthy was beginning to make lists of certain books. I didn't like that. I don't like it when anyone or any group tells me, "Here's a reading list; go read those books—and only those books." I don't like it when any group bullies me with lists. That's not the way a library works. I want a totally free library with all the books on the shelves, all the Arab books, all the Jewish books, all the black books, all the white books, all the Catholic books, all the Protestant books. All lined up for me so that I can come in and fall in love and gain information anywhere I need it. And then, within myself, fantasize on top of that.

So I wrote a book called Fahrenheit 451. It's an adventure, first of all. It's my going through a series of adventures with a man who's a totalitarian. It doesn't matter whether he's left or right. He's a burner of ideas. He's a true believer without ever knowing what he really believes. He's a stupid man. He's an ignorant man. He's a prejudiced man. And suddenly, in the midst of this nightmare, he wakes himself up and begins to look around and realize he's burning the ideas of the world, and he changes before our eyes from a villain to a hero. He decides to save the books instead. He decides to do something about it. The genesis of that novel is the time I lived in, twenty years ago, that made me sick to my stomach and heart. I want us all to leave each other alone; that's really what it's all about. I want us all to be able to move very freely through our society and pick up all the information we need to make very wise decisions.

Dying of Reality
There are some libraries in this country that refuse to carry the Oz books because they don't consider them literature. The fear of many of our social thinkers for books of fantasy is incredible to me. I happen to believe in fantasy. I happen to believe we survive by our wits, by our

ticles, books, plays, and scripts. His books include The Martian Chronicles, The Illustrated Man, and Fahrenheit 451; he also did the screenplay for the film Moby Dick. First published in 1939 at the age of 19, he has since appeared in virtually every American magazine that publishes quality fiction. He is currently finishing work on a novel, The Halloween Tree, a history of Halloween, and a book of poetry, When Elephants Last in the Dooryard Bloomed, both to be published by Knopf. He is working on the screenplay of his The Fox and the Forest; on a biographical work; a musical version of The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit; and a space-age madrigal, Pius the Wanderer, with Lalo Schifrin.

This article was adapted from a taped session with fans at the Inglewood (Calif.) Public Library. WLB extends special appreciation to Adelaide Kerr, exhibits librarian, for providing the tape, and applauds her imagination and enthusiasm in arranging and promoting the enormously popular Bradbury event. Mrs. Kerr, who knew that Mr. Bradbury didn't drive, called for volunteer drivers in her advance publicity. When offers poured in, he said that if he could really choose the kind of car, he'd like a Duesenberg—the car of his Hollywood boyhood dreams. After several front-page appeals in local newspapers, a Duesenberg he had, and in such style did he arrive at the library.
tained themselves within the theater of the head, and, for a few hours a day, they must have had the ability to pretend it wasn’t there. The gift of life is so strong in all of us that we prefer, if it’s necessary, if we’re given the choice, to go mad rather than die. Why do we have so many insane people alive in the world? What kind of selection did they make for themselves? How did they choose? Didn’t they make the choice which questions itself in this way? “I love living so much you can’t take it away from me, therefore, I will turn inward to my own resources. I will go mad rather than be destroyed.” So they choose madness rather than death. Very interesting, the choice made by this living thing that we are. Because we do love life, we do hang onto the cliff, hoping to make it back up over the edge.

In the Gymnasium of Terror

I tried to write a whole series of stories about the gift of imagination and about the men who wrote great tales for us, to exorcise, in the gymnasium of terror, some of our nightmares. My story “The Exiles” is about a bunch of sociologist rocketmen coming to Mars. With them they bring all the last copies of all the books by Poe and Hawthorne, and Dickens. They burn the books on Mars, and we see the death, then, of the great writers of the past—there on Mars being destroyed by the super-realists who really don’t know what they are doing and who can only react in fear.

In S is for Space I wrote a similar story called “Pillar of Fire,” in which a man who has been buried for hundreds of years in Salem comes alive, like Dracula coming from the grave. He is summoned from the grave because he is an inhabitant of the last graveyard on Earth. All the graveyards have been destroyed. They’re very efficient in the future: as soon as you’re dead they burn you immediately with no fancy ceremonies. They get rid of all of these ugly graveyards and all the ugly memories, and they destroy along with it all the books of Poe and Le Fanu and the Brothers Grimm. This last body, remaining on the entire planet comes alive and in the spirit of Poe, goes through the world trying to salvage the concepts of death that once moved our world; the imaginative concept, the
fun concept. Because, after all, death is a delicious thing that we love to play with. Death is a vacant spot in the jaw, isn’t it, where they pulled a tooth? So, sensing your own death, you put your tongue in that raw spot and keep the tongue going back to investigate the possible reality of your own mortality at some future date. We all entertain these thoughts.

This being true, we must write about them. We must seize them out of the subconscious and perform with them so that we can go on living, so we won’t have to think about it all the time! Since death is Nothing, we must make a symbol for it so we can look at the symbol and discuss it. It’s like a sum in algebra. You must write the numbers down before you can begin. If you put nothing on the page, you will get nothing. Death being nothing, must have a symbol on a page to represent it. I’ve done a whole series of stories with symbols on pages, including the two I’ve already mentioned, so we can meet and know and chew and swallow death as writer and reader.

**Mr. Dark in the Library**

As far as libraries are concerned, I’ve done other things in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, where I’ve described the whole delicious business of going to the library at night.

When I was ten, the greatest thing in my life every Monday night was running with my brother to the library. Especially on autumn nights, when we ran with leaves along the sidewalks, and at the library sat in the warmth and the green-shaded light, and got all these gorgeous books, and then ran home as fast as we could, passing along the way a penny arcade where there were many electric-shock machines, where we’d stop and take on a load of electricity. Remember those devices you grab onto for a penny to see if you can electrocute yourself? And your brother? First you’d go stand in a puddle, and come in with wet feet, and dare each other to take more of the juice.

Years later, remembering that penny arcade, I put it into *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. The biggest scene of all is at the very end, when Mr. Dark comes to the library late at night looking for the two boys, Will and Jim, who have gone there to hide because Will’s father is the librarian-janitor there. The boys hide themselves up on the shelves, and one of the most delicious moments in the book comes when Mr. Dark prowls around the shelves, and feeling for them, using the Dust Witch to help him find the boys. Mr. Dark begins to climb the shelves. And he reaches up and finds them nestled under various alphabetical letters and puts his hands in and seizes the boys off the shelves, and takes them off to the carnival. It’s one of the loveliest scenes I’ve ever written in my life. I had great fun with it. Of course, that’s the secret of my writing. I love what I am doing. It has to be fun or it won’t work. *Something Wicked* is my favorite book, for me my most delicious book, because I wrote
about them. So we put a lot of these dreams in special forms in books so that we can examine them and think about them and read them over and over again.

There's a fantastic scene in *Something Wicked* that I love very much. Toward the end of the book, I got to thinking what the carnival was, what its purpose was. I began thinking about the Christian concept of Hell, Lucifer, the lost souls. Have you ever asked yourself this question: Why *would* the devil want our souls in the *first* place? What *fun* is there in it for Lucifer, for the devil, for Mr. Dark, to grab our souls? There's got to be a reason. Not just: he wants your soul, period. There *must* be a motive. I couldn't recall ever having read a satisfactory explanation. So I wrote a section in my book telling why. At one point, Jim says, "Where do they all come from?" these dark people, part of the Dark Carnival that's crossing the world. The father, Charles Holloway, replies:

Maybe once it was just one man walking across Europe jingling his ankle bells, a lute on his shoulder making a hunchback shadow before Columbus. Maybe a man walked around in a monkey skin a million years ago, stuffing himself with other people's unhappiness, chewed their pain all day like spearmint gum for the sweet savor and trotted faster, revivified by personal disaster. Maybe his son after him refined his father's deadfalls, mantraps, bone-crunchers, head-achers, flesh-twitchers, soul-skinners. These laid the green scum on lonely ponds from which came vinegar, gnats to snuff up noses, mosquitoes to ride summer night flesh and sting forth those bumps that carnival phrenologists dearly love to fondle and prophesy upon. So from one man here, one man there, walking as swift as his oily glances, it became scuttles of dog men begging gifts of trouble. Pandering misery, seeking under carpets for centipede treads. Watchful of night sweats, harkening to all bedroom doors to hear men twist, bastling themselves with remorse and warm-water dreams. The stuff of nightmare is their plain bread. They butter it with pain. They set their clocks by death-watch beetles and thrive the century. They were the men with the leather ribbon whips who sweated up the pyramids, seasoning it with other people's salt and other people's cracked hearts. They coursed Europe on the white horses of the plague. They whispered to Caesar that he was mortal. They sold daggers at half price in the Grand March Sale.

It with one purpose—I wanted all of you to read it with a flashlight under the covers late at night! And if a book isn't *that* good, it's not worth reading at all.

Now how many writers in our time have cared enough about scaring themselves to begin with, so that they can scare others? It's a very necessary thing to do. Because life is pretty scary. So, we have to rehearse our scares, don't we? We have to look over the whole spectrum of terrors and things that go bump in the night, and dreadful things *do* happen to people. We have dreams
Some must have been lazing clowns, foot props for emperors, princes and epileptic popes. Then, out on the road, gypsies in time, their populations grew as the world grew, spread, and there was more delicious variety of pain to thrive on. The train put wheels under them and here they run down the long road, out of the Gothic and Baroque; look at their wagons and coaches, the carving like medieval shrines. All of it stuff once drawn by horses, mules, or maybe men. Why? You need fuel, gas to run a carnival on, don't you? Women live off gossip and what's gossip but the swap of headaches, sour spit, arthritic bones, ruptured and mended flesh, indiscretions, storms of madness, calms after the storms. If some people don't have something juicy to chew on, their choppers would prolapse, their souls with them. Multiply their apparent pleasure at funerals, their chuckling through breakfast obituaries, add all the cat-fight marriages where folk spend careers ripping skin off each other, and patching it back upside-down, and quack doctors slicing persons to read their guts like tea leaves, then sewing them up tight with finger-printed threads, square the whole dynamite factory by ten quadrillion and you've got the black candle-power of this one carnival. All the meannesses we harbor, they borrow in redoubled spades. They're a billion times itchier for pain, sorrow, and sickness than the average man. We salt our lives with other people's sins. Our flesh to us tastes sweet, but the carnival doesn't care if it stinks by moonlight instead of sun, so long as it gorges on fear and pain. That's the fuel! The vapor that spins the carousel, the raw stuffs of terror, the excruciating agony of guilt, the screams of real and imagined wounds, the carnival sucks that gas, ignites it and chugs along the way.

A Language Person

Whenever most new, modern, American novels come out, I go read Rumpelstiltskin again, because I think the modern American novel is bankrupt of imagination, wit, style, idea on any level. I am a language person. I've loved poetry all my life and my favorite people, whom I visit at the library again and again, are William Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw, and G.K. Chesterton and Loren Eiseley. People with ideas. People with images. People with language.

So, I finally got a rationale for why the devil would give a damn about your soul. He's going to eat all of us. He's going to live off our pain, live off our remorse, live off our guilt. Fascinating! I don't know why someone didn't bother to make a rationale years ago. I accept this. It scares me. The devil, of course, being each one of you at times. Don't you love some of these things you see? Don't you know married couples, who spend their lives fighting? They live off each other's pain, every day of their lives. And what we're trying to do is prevent this sort of thing, not put upon each other, not destroy each other. So, we have positive and negative, and the choice between the two.
People who romance me with death, and excitement, and make me want to go on living.

I am in this world to make you want to go on living. If I don’t do that as a writer, I’m a failure. I’m here to help you survive, because I want to survive.

Thinking this, in my library, I stared at all the books, and said, “My God, if I could once in my life, write one book that would wind up on the shelf there, leaning against Robert Louis Stevenson, tilting against Mark Twain, cheek by jowl with Black Beauty, or—you name your own favorite book out of the past—Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, to mention one of my favorites, the Oz books, Huck Finn, and, of course, Tom Sawyer, Robinson Crusoe, all the books of Jules Verne. These great loves of mine! Beautiful books. I’ve been reading them the last five or ten years, and they’re better today for me than they were when I was twelve years old. If I could only create one book that would finally, at the end of my life, live on that shelf with those lovely people. They’re the people who are going to live. Most of the stuff that’s read today will die, fade away, be gone forever, and Alice in Wonderland will go on for centuries. I want to be with these heroes of mine, Twain and Dickens and Stevenson!

So, I wrote Something Wicked This Way Comes. When it came out, for a long while there were very few reviews, very little attention. The book sold moderately well, and now, seven or eight years later, it’s selling about a thousand copies a year in hardcover, which is very pleasant. The book is still in print. But the great thing happened when the book came out in soft cover. It’s been selling now hundreds of thousands of copies, and it’s had its own acceptance among people like yourself who go to it for the very same reason that I wrote it—because you do read with your flashlights, I trust.

Ideas to me are fantastic and irresistible. They come up and kick me, they come up and yell in my ear, they pull at my coattails, they run me down, they seize me like gigantic bulldogs, and shake me in their teeth. I’m victimized by my ideas. I don’t write them, they write themselves. All my characters are madmen, and they grab the typewriter out of my hands and write the stories and when they are all done, they sit back and say, “There they are, Ray. It’s finished.”

Questions and Answers
After Mr. Bradbury’s talk, the audience posed questions. Following are excerpts from the exchange:

Do you believe in reincarnation?
Yes. I am my father alive today, he was me alive yesterday. And my children are me alive tomorrow. That’s perfect reincarnation. I couldn’t ask for anything more.

Has television taken away imagination?
Television isn’t very imaginative, but I don’t think you can take things away from anyone. I happen to believe an imagination will, when it’s bored, move. I remember some years ago when my older daughters used to watch “77 Sunset Strip” every week. It was a dreadful show, but Daddy used to sit there because Daddy smelt good, you know, and girls love to have their father sit and watch tv shows with them. So, I’d sit there and slumber a little. But the night finally came, when my oldest girl was twelve, when she got up and walked out of the room. I said, “Where are you going?” and she said, “I know what’s going to happen next.” That’s the answer, really. “I know what’s going to happen,” and then you go crack a book. There’s nothing wrong with tv; in fact, it’s a wonderful way to get people to crack books. We’re going to use all these media as means of provoking our curiosity. I think a lot of people are like I am. I saw the film Patton a couple of weeks ago. It fascinated me enough so that the next day I bought two books on Patton to find all the missing pieces.

Have you always loved Halloween better than any other holiday?
Yes, don’t you? I’m still going out tricking and treating with my kids. They can’t frighten me off. I pretend I’m going along to protect them or to be helpful and carry the bags, which I eat out of constantly. I’ve never missed one Halloween in my life. I started going out when I was three or four, and that’s about forty-six years of Hallows. Now I’m finishing a novel called The Halloween Tree, which is a history of Halloween.
How do you give yourself time to write?

You must! You just do! Because what you put on paper is not the sum of the things you've read, but the sum of the things that you are. That's important! It's you on paper! That's where teachers of writing are wrong in making up lists for you to read based on their loves. You must make up your own lists. You must go to the library and fall in love. You must write what you want to write. Don't listen to any of your friends. And don't try to read books unless a friend runs up to you with a wild light in his eye and says, "My God, I just read Fu Manchu and he's beautiful!" And you go and read Fu Manchu and you say ahhhh—the great! I don't care what it is, make your own loves. I always know as soon as I put a book down whether I love it.

I'm in love with a TV special I'd like to film right now, "A History of the Horror Film." A whole hour filled with delicious scenes from monster and vampire films. I saw my co-producer in the street the other day, and I said, "What's happening with the horror-film outline I wrote for you people?" He said, "The guy back East is reading it a second time." I said, "We're doomed! Doomed! You must never read it a second time. If you don't know what you love, first off, give up!" It's like going out with a girl and you come home at night and someone says, "What did you think of that girl?" and you say you don't know. Come on. She's either awful or she's not.

What do you think of the films so far made of your books?

I loved Fahrenheit 451 and I didn't like Illustrated Man. I don't think it worked. They never showed me a script, which is ridiculous. After all, I'm just the author.

Are you going to make some films during the next two years?

I'll be directing for the first time next year for a TV special. I hope to be just as bad as some of the other people you see, and then start to be excellent from there. I have no huge dreams, but I do have a dream and I want to try it once, and then if it doesn't work, I'll hang up my boots and riding crop and not direct again.

Do you follow any special disciplines in writing?

No, my ideas discipline me. Sure, I had to start to discipline myself when I was in high school and in junior high. But I've always been so deeply in love with writing, it's never been an art work or any problem. To those of you who don't care enough about writing to write, I just say cut it out and go away and do something else. You've got to find something you love that drives you to do it, otherwise it's not worth doing. If you have to force yourself all the time to do it, you'd better find another career.