

LAL Nebraska Level II Winner 2016

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Teacher: Nancy Svoboda, Book: *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

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Dear Ray Bradbury,

 . Oh, did you want to read that? Sorry, but that sentence might have offended you, so I had to black it out. Of course, if I really wanted to write something that didn't offend anyone, I would have to cover up the entire page. Or of course I could burn it. But Mr. Bradbury, you know that, because the only reason that I know that is because of your book, *Fahrenheit 451*.

I read your book about a year ago. It was beautifully written, but I am not a person who has Eureka moments, but rather someone who needs to reflect. Because of this, I often do not pick up another book right away, and instead let the ideas from the literature plant their seeds and sprout in my mind. Over the course of about a month I reflected within myself about the themes of your book. And then I began to observe the world around me looking for censorship. Hoping, but also dreading, to answer the basic question: is *Fahrenheit 451* just enjoyable fiction or does it actually apply to me? And soon enough, I noticed.

I noticed how most of my classmates and peers had no idea what was going on around them. I noticed that the ones that knew what the Vietnam War was did not know that we were not wanted there by the Vietnamese, or even that we weren't successful. I read in the news about how a brand new textbook was phrased, calling Africans shipped to the United States against their will "workers" that "immigrated". I listened to an assembly speaker tell my entire school that George Washington was a simple farmer, instead of telling us he was a plantation owner with over 300 slaves because that might tarnish our view of America. I listened and I noticed, and the more I saw the more deeply concerned I was.

Of course, right now, if someone decided to burn books it wouldn't go over very well. But book burning is just one very obvious example of censorship. It's one thing to send a book up in flames, or cover up parts of books with a black marker, but the most dangerous censorship is the censorship we don't notice. The quiet removal of beautiful pieces of literature from school libraries because the ideas expressed in the writing is controversial. The inclusion of certain facts, like the Vietnam War occurring, but the exclusion of parts of the story that make the United States look bad. The inclusion of one perspective, but the exclusion of perspectives that differ, is censorship. This kind of censorship is the most dangerous, because it often goes unnoticed and undisputed.

By now, it was the beginning of the next year. I had been busy all summer, and I had not thought much about my concerns that arose the year before. But one day, while speaking with a classmate, it came up that I read the newspaper on a daily basis. My classmate was shocked. Doesn't it get scary?" I remember him asking me. I replied with a simple yes, because to be fair, he was right. The news does get very "scary" sometimes, as he put it. So why **do** I read the

news? Why do I read the news, when it gets so scary and confusing and so incredibly complicated? I questioned myself over and over, but the only answer I could come up with was “because I can”. And not only **can** I read the news, but I **should** read the news, in order to better understand the complicated, multifaceted world we live in. My observations from last year stated flowing back to me like a river when a dam breaks. Why, when we are in a golden age of easily accessible information, do we still censor?

I soon realized that the reason we censor things has little to do with society, as I first thought, but more to do with human nature. It is human nature to want to live in a simple world. It is human nature to not necessarily want to live in a perfect, pristine world, that’s why teachers bother to teach about the Vietnam War at all, and why politicians can use the fear tactic so effectively. However, it **is** human nature to want to live in a simple, one perspective world. Almost every country, religion, or even terrorist group want to be painted as the “good guys” and anyone who dare oppose them are seen as the “bad guys”. This thought process is how the book burning in *Fahrenheit 451* began, or course, eliminating opposing perspectives and opinions in order to simplify reader’s thoughts until there was only one perspective left to tell us how to think.

While my discoveries in many ways were world discoveries, in some ways they were also personal discoveries. I discovered that I personally need to be more grateful for the non-censorship I have already, and of course, question the censorships I see already in place, because censorships today don’t necessarily involve smoke.

Thank you,
Madeline Walker