

Appreciation

Bradbury’s Calling Card Was Weaving Tales Of Cosmos

BY JULIA KELLER

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CHICAGO — The history books say that Yuri Gagarin was the first man in space, but the history books are wrong.

It was Ray Bradbury. And unlike Gagarin, he took the rest of us along for the ride.

The kid from Waukegan, Ill., whose leaps of imagination enabled him to go higher and further than any other writer of his generation, died Tuesday in Los Angeles at 91. His magnificent and captivating stories about intergalactic travel, about life on other planets, about future worlds and past ones, too, including his own small-town upbringing in a place that always seemed to be a lovingly rendered version of Waukegan, came bubbling forth from him.

He was a wildly prolific and yet sternly disciplined writer, a yarn-spinner in love with words and with the vigor required to craft them into narratives. “How did I get from Waukegan, Illinois, to Red Planet, Mars?” was how he began an essay in his collection “Zen in the Art of Writing” 1990. The answer: passion. A writer, he advised, “should be a thing of fevers and enthusiasms,” ready to embrace “the fun of anger and disillusion, the fun of loving and being loved, of moving and being moved by this masked ball which dances us from cradle to churchyard.”

That fire was kindled early in the lakefront village north of Chicago. In what we now know will be among his final published works, an essay in the current issue of The New Yorker, Bradbury recalled his excitement when first encountering science fiction: “It was one frenzy after one elation after one enthusiasm after one hysteria after another,” he wrote. “I was always yelling and running somewhere. ... I would go out to that lawn on summer nights and reach up to the red light of Mars and say, ‘Take me home!’”

(Full disclosure, one of this critic’s works is part of “Shadow Show,” an upcoming collection celebrating Bradbury.)

In his long life, he was many things, including a warrior for freedom. His most famous book, “Fahrenheit 451” (1953), is a cautionary tale about the insidious creep of censorship; its sinister evocation of a world in the maybe-not-so-distant future in which firefighters are employed to burn books is startlingly plausible. “A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it,” snaps Beatty, the fire chief, to Guy Montag, the troubled protagonist of “Fahrenheit 451” — a number representing the temperature at which books go from paper to ash.

Bradbury wrote the screenplay for a 1956 film version of “Moby-Dick,” directed by John Huston, and he wrote episodes of TV series such as “The Twilight Zone,” “Alfred Hitchcock Presents” and “The Ray Bradbury Theater.” He turned out more than 600 short stories, including widely anthologized classics such as “There Will Come Soft Rains” (1950) and “All Summer in a Day” (1980).

But the space books are the ones that made Ray Bradbury a household name. To compare him to other writers of science fiction is a bit of a mismatch; he was the gold standard. He has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. A crater and an asteroid were named for him by NASA. Like Jules Verne, his works predicted technological developments; in “Fahrenheit 451,” he placed — in 1953 — flat-screen televisions.

In that book, as in all of his others, his style was florid, deeply felt and unabashedly romantic; it was redolent of the work of so-called “literary” authors such as D.H. Lawrence or even one of Bradbury’s idols, Herman Melville. “His prose sings,” noted Laura Bentley, a poet based in West Virginia who was a close friend of Bradbury and his family. “It’s masterful and electrifying.” It was a style that, like a telescope, brought other worlds so close to the eye that you could swear you’d be able to reach out and touch them:

“The ship came down from space. It came from the stars and the black velocities, and the shining movements, and the silent gulfs of space,” Bradbury wrote in “The Martian Chronicles” (1950), his luminous yet precisely detailed masterpiece of linked stories. “It was a new ship; it had fire in its body and men in its metal cells, and it moved with a clean silence, fiery and warm.”

Like Melville’s novels, though, Bradbury’s adventure tales were

about obsession and guilt and curiosity and longing and love as much as they were about the razzle-dazzle excitement of discovery and the grand lure of destiny. Bradbury wrote about worlds that never were — as far as we know — while keeping in mind the rules of the old, familiar one: People are brave and foolish, noble and base, lucky and doomed, in unequal and always interesting measures.

When he turned his eyes away from comets and supernovae and returned his gaze to the surface of the Earth, he saw well beyond the present — in both directions. He remembered everything, including the day of his birth, he insisted to his biographer, Sam Weller, the author of “The Bradbury Chronicles” (2005), who teaches at Columbia College Chicago. “I have what might be called almost total recall back to my birth,” he told Weller during a series of conversations that became “Listen to the Echoes: The Ray Bradbury

Interviews” (2010) and that reveal Bradbury’s pugnacious side. “This is a thing I have debated with psychologists and friends over the years. They say, ‘It’s impossible.’ Yet I remember. My response to people who say, ‘It’s impossible’ is: ‘Were you there? Because I was.’”

That prodigious memory enabled him to summon the sights, sounds and smells that inform many of his richest and most beloved books, such as “Dandelion Wine” (1957), a luscious novel about a boy growing up in Green Town — really Waukegan, as Bradbury readily admitted in the introduction to a 1999 edition — on the glorious cusp of summer 1928:

“Summer gathered in the weather, the wind had the proper touch, the breathing of the world was long and warm and slow. You had only to rise, lean from your window, and know that this indeed was the first real time of freedom and living, this was the first morning of summer.”

So how to reconcile the sci-fi pioneer Bradbury, the man who dreamed up Martian colonies and time machines, with the man who spun heartwarming tales about small-town boys in a by-gone era who picked wild strawberries and were rocked to sleep by the rhythms of grandparents chatting on front porches while stars freckled the sky?

We don’t have to. Bradbury was both. Weller has called him a “nostalgic visionary,” and that paradoxical phrase explains it nicely. Bradbury was a literary bridge between the past and the future, between the comforts of memory and the challenges of prescience.

The paradoxes didn’t stop at his fiction. Haunted by the memory of a car accident he had witnessed at 14, Bradbury never obtained a driver’s license. Yet drive he did — not a car, but the Mars rover. Scientists at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory gave him the controls, and from some 250 million miles away, the author



KIRK MCCOY/LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT
Author Ray Bradbury is photographed in 2002. Bradbury, the author of “Fahrenheit 451” died Wednesday. He was 91.

guided the rover across the red-hued landscape that his stories had done so much to make irresistible to us.

“Work is the only answer,” he told Weller a few years ago. “I

have three rules to live by: Get your work done. If that doesn’t work, shut up and drink your gin, and when all else fails, run like hell.”

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