

# EDITORIAL

Sheila Williams

## POET OF MARS

I had to swim upstream to appreciate the works of Ray Bradbury. The two people who most shaped my earliest tastes in science fiction were not fans of his tales. My grandfather, a firefighter and avid reader, made no attempt to hide his annoyance with an author who could imagine a world where firemen started fires and burned books. My father maintained that Bradbury mostly wrote fantasy and that genre didn't interest him. My dad had introduced me to the hard-SF trinity of Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein. His passion for Edgar Rice Burroughs, who brought us princesses, warriors, and synthetic men of Mars, was limitless. My father liked some Bradbury. He'd read "A Sound of Thunder" to me and we'd spent a few hours discussing the consequences of a time traveler stepping on a butterfly, but he didn't care for stories about ordinary life or fiction that held a surreal edge. He certainly had no patience for a book about a suburban development on Mars.

I never could convince my father that Burroughs' swordsmen knocking around Barsoom were any less fantastic than Bradbury's vision of the same planet. No one in my family expected me to mindlessly imitate their taste in literature, but my discovery of the joys of *The Martian Chronicles* was one of my first steps toward independent thinking. I quickly devoured *The Illustrated Man* and *I Sing the Body Electra* on my own. When, at sixteen, I lent my minister my favorite novel—*The Listeners* by James Gunn—he returned the favor by handing me *Dandelion Wine* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Some of Bradbury's writing fell under science fiction, some of it was definitely fantasy, but the distinction didn't seem very important. What was important was that it exposed me to a different way to tell a story, and a different story to tell.

Commenting on Bradbury's death this

past June, New York *Times*' critic Michiko Kakutani said the author "saw the strange and miraculous everywhere, and mastered the art of spinning them into enduring yarns." According to the *Times* obituary by Gerald Jonas, Bradbury found acceptance in magazines like *Mademoiselle* and *The Saturday Evening Post* by eliminating SF jargon from his prose. "He packaged his troubling speculations about the future in an appealing blend of cozy colloquialisms and poetic metaphors." Bradbury wasn't the only SF author writing about ordinary life or using metaphoric language. Contemporaneous writers include Zenna Henderson, Theodore Sturgeon, Alfred Bester, and Kurt Vonnegut. Along with Vonnegut, though, he was one of the very, very few SF authors who appealed to a mass audience. Echoes of Bradbury's themes and the attention he paid to the style and language of his writing can easily be found in the works of many modern SF, fantasy, and mainstream authors.

Bradbury said that he read poetry every day of his life. In 1971, Caltech held a symposium in celebration of Mariner 9, which would become the first spacecraft to orbit another planet the following day. It's well worth viewing an excerpt from a NASA video of the event at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBtZjbTDTDk&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBtZjbTDTDk&feature=youtu.be). Bradbury is clearly delighted to be included, but believes he is the "least scientific of all the people up on the platform." Instead of talking about science, he reads from his lovely poem, "If Only We Had Taller Been." Bradbury felt the poem encapsulated "why I love space travel, why I write science fiction."

By the time I entered the field, he seemed to be concentrating more on poetry and playwrighting than on fiction. Once, we asked permission to reprint a poem, but his representative told us the work would cost us a thousand dollars. Since that was a significant portion of the bud-

get for an entire issue, we were unable to pursue reprint rights any further.

Still, although Bradbury moved beyond science fiction's borders, his roots were in the genre. Bradbury had grown up on the works of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. He believed that Edgar Rice Burroughs was the "most influential writer in the history of the world." In a conversation with Sam Weller, author of *Listen to the Echoes, The Ray Bradbury Interviews*, he remarked, "Say to a girl or boy at age ten: Hey, life is fun! Grow tall! I've talked to more biochemists and more astronomers and technologists in various fields, who, when they were ten years old, fell in love with John Carter and Tarzan and decided to become something romantic. Burroughs put us on the moon. All the technologists read Burroughs."

A lot of people grew tall on the works of Ray Bradbury. On May 31, 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev held a luncheon at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC, for various cultural luminaries that included Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury. According to Isaac, they were invited because the president "wanted to meet with representatives of American culture who were

well-known in the Soviet Union. For instance, Ray Bradbury and I are science fiction writers whose books are enormously popular in the Soviet Union."

Perhaps Burroughs put us on the Moon, but Bradbury was no less influential. Just yesterday as I write this, on what would have been his ninety-second birthday, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory announced that it was naming Curiosity's Martian touchdown site Bradbury Landing. Michael Meyer, a NASA program scientist for Curiosity said, "This was not a difficult choice for the science team. Many of us and millions of other readers were inspired in our lives by stories Ray Bradbury wrote to dream of the possibility of life on Mars."

In addition to the chessmen and gods and all the job titles Burroughs proposed, someday when we've settled Mars, we'll probably need surveyors and realtors and doctors and actuaries and teachers and engineers of Mars. We'll need writers and poets, too, but Bradbury was and will remain a very special poet of Mars.