

Remembering Ray Bradbury

by James Hart



Despite myriad trip photos and family e-mails implying the contrary, my experiences in Australia weren't all fun in the sun. In fact, about five months in it dawned on me that I had moved halfway around the world only to be in a world of my own: no one in my writing program felt the same as I did; they didn't care about the work I was into and they weren't interested in making friends. I felt pretty miserable for awhile.

At times I felt so bad that I couldn't even do any work. What the hell's the point, I thought, no one cares, and none of this shit will ever see the light of day anyway. My second semester was halfway over and I had nothing to show for it.

Why were things so awful? Why can't I do any work anymore? Hell, why don't I even feel like getting *up* in the morning? I was pretty sunk.

After another week of doing nothing outside of feeling sorry for myself, I decided to return to first principles; to pick myself up, I would seek inspiration from the very people who had first given it to me: Stephen King, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, etc. Then maybe somehow I could get back into writing and through that, get my shit together.

I was looking online for a copy of *Zen and the Art of Writing*—I stupidly left my own at home—when I happened to stumble upon a talk that Bradbury had given to a small liberal arts college some years back. It was

late at night at the library, and on my particular floor I was the only one around; I sat there alone and hung on every word he said.

Bradbury has an interesting presence about him. His strange, childlike humor, unbelievable intelligence and penchant for swearing immediately make me think of my grandmother. (They even wave exactly the same.) The talk was a joy to listen to and exactly what I needed. He reminded me that writing wasn't work, for cryin' out loud, it was a *celebration*; it doesn't involve labor and toil but *feeling*. And if you can't get behind that, buddy boy, then get the *hell out of writing!* You have no business saying anything if you find it such a chore.

He was right of course. And although I didn't feel like writing it, I did have a story idea I was kicking around. A very *Bradbury* kind of story, as a matter of fact; one he'd probably approve of.

The next day marked the start of the mid-semester break. I still felt awful, but I made myself a promise: I was going to spend each day at the library ("*Live* in the library, for *chrissake!*"), whether I felt like it or not, and I was going to work on my story. And what's more, I was going to be happy doing it. No more being miserable. I was going to be happy, because Ray Bradbury gave me permission to be happy. I realize that might sound rather stupid, but it was all I had.

So I did. I plodded each day into campus, sat my ass down in one of the empty study lounges—I had my pick, it was the break after all—and I worked on my story. It was very slow going, but after two weeks I had a draft prepared.

My professor wasn't too thrilled about it. Right off the bat I committed one of the Cardinal Sins of short story writing—*never* open up a story by talking about the weather—and the whole piece relies on constant invocation of the Pathetic Fallacy. I told her I was sticking with it, in part because I had nothing else to turn in but also because I felt that I knew what I was doing.

I used it for my class workshop, and although no one was all too crazy about it, they supposed it wasn't a *bad* story; it might be okay with a few good tweaks here and there.

I thanked them for their feedback and threw it in the trash. Not because I was stubborn, but because it didn't feel right. I thought about what Bradbury said about changing your work just to please others. You can't do it, he said, to hell with that. That's just not how it works. It has to feel right for *you*, or you'll compromise too much and it'll destroy you. So I kept it as it was.

It became the most important piece I published during my time there. The story was accepted into one of the oldest and most respected short story anthologies in Australia, and copies were sold in every major book-

store; the book launch was its own event at the Sydney Writer's Festival. Some professors, whose writing I very much admired and were the reason for my even going there, have either emailed me or said in person that they read my story and really enjoyed it.

It was right after I finished the last of my thesis when I checked the news and saw that Ray Bradbury had died. I would be lying if I said I was able to keep my eyes dry throughout the day.

RIP, Mr. Bradbury. Mr. Electrico was right; you will live forever.

