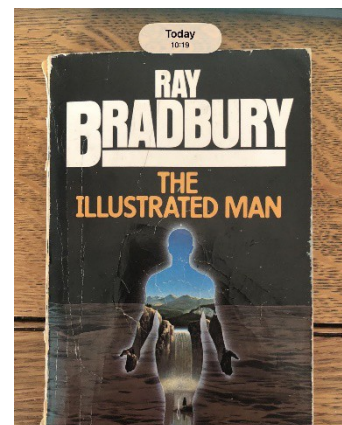


BOOKWORMS – August report from Celia Moss

At our August meeting we discussed 'The Illustrated Man' by Ray Bradbury. This collection of 18 short stories was published in 1951 and has never been out of print. The stories are linked together by an unnamed narrator who meets a man who is covered with living tattoos. Each tattoo shows a vision of the future. As each story is told, the corresponding tattoo disappears. At the end of the book there is only one empty space on the Illustrated Man's back which begins to come to life and shows the unnamed narrator being strangled. Not willing to lose his life the unnamed narrator runs away. We liked this useful framing technique.



We felt the book was very much concerned with the issues of its time; it dealt with Cold War anxiety and fears of nuclear destruction as well as issues around racial segregation. Another major theme was the post war boom in technology. Bradbury warns us of the dangers of embracing advances in technology too freely. He feared that without care they could erode human connections.

The story 'The Veld' illustrates some of these concerns. It describes a suburban house in the future with George and Linda and their children. The house cooks their meals, cleans itself and washes their clothes. It also provides a high-tech virtual reality nursery that projects environments directly from the children's minds. Lydia feels uneasy about the nursery and they enter it to find a South African Veld. This is well described; the 'hot yellow sun' makes George sweat as it feels so real. They can smell the 'great rusty smell of animals' and hear the thump of antelope feet and the 'papery rustling of vultures' circling overhead. When the lions arrive with 'the smell of meat dripping from their panting, drippy mouths', the couple are chased out of the room. The couple realise that the automated house has become the children's mother. They both feel they have lost their roles as parents. The children deny they have created this scene but George finds an old wallet of his in a corner of the room where the lions have been and it is covered in blood and saliva. They decide to turn off the nursery and leave the house but the children beg for just one more minute..... The children call their parents into the Veld. They then shut them in the room and the lions attack and kill them. When a friend of George's goes into the nursery he finds the children calmly eating a picnic lunch. The lions have finished feeding and the vultures are dropping down from the blazing sky.

We considered the impact today of 'iPad parenting', the growth of AI companions and virtual babysitters and reflected that although some of his themes are dated, many have stood up and are still relevant today. The nursery has provided a wonderful learning experience for the children but it was not able to teach warmth, kindness, empathy and human connection.

We thought Ray Bradbury was a marvellous storyteller. The stories are short and accessible. His other great strength is in the power of his descriptive writing. This was seen in 'The Veld' and also in the 'The Long Rain'. In this story a small squad of US astronauts crash on Venus which is described as a sweltering jungle where the rain never stops. They struggle to find safety in a Sun dome but most die or become insane. The Captain reaches safety at last or is he only hallucinating? The story is gripping but what really stands out are the descriptions of the relentless rain. He makes us feel the rain as heavy and suffocating. Similarly, in 'The Kaleidoscope' a rocket ship explodes in deep space. The crew members in their space suits are scattered in different directions. The men talk through their suit radios and largely reach acceptance about their lives and deaths. The story comes alive with the power of the descriptive writing; for example, as the crew members drift apart their coloured spacesuits scatter across the void like tumbling beads inside a kaleidoscope.

Most of us thoroughly enjoyed these stories although some of us found them rather too bleak. We

all had our favourites and it hasn't been possible to write about all of them here. Some of them have dated more than others but in general they have stood the test of time. We recommend this classic Sci Fi, fantasy and horror collection.