

## **Merit of English Section**

### **Senior Division**

**Name of Winner : Ng Hei Yan, Yammy**

**Name of School : Heep Yunn**

**Book Title : Fahrenheit 451**

**Author : Ray Bradbury**

**Publisher : Simon and Schuster**

*“Fahrenheit 451: the temperature at which book-paper catches fire and burns”*

Fahrenheit 451 is set in a fictional world where books are banned, technology is increasingly advanced, and digital mass media is surging in popularity. People have abandoned books for an endless supply of mindless television shows, where people have given up on slowing down to enjoy the scenery for life-threatening car rides, and where people have traded

listening to others for sticking their ears with “seashells”, a device that plays music and audio. Sounds familiar? That is because this is the exact state that our world is in right now.

Guy Montag is a firefighter who sets books ablaze along with his fellow firefighters, until one day when he meets Clarisse McClellan, a peculiar girl who possesses a sense of sensitivity towards life and a tendency to think about the world, causing Montag to rethink the whole purpose behind burning books.

This kick starts Montag's journey of falling in love with books as he realises the frivolity behind the mass-produced digital media and the danger behind technological advancement.

With his attempts to change his wife's mind about books failing to no avail, he ends up being reported to the government for the possession of books by his wife. Out of options, he is forced to flee the town and meets a group of intellectuals that supports reading in the countryside. Upon the

destruction of the town with a nuclear bomb, the group and Montag return to the town to rebuild it.

After completing the book, it was clear what Bradbury wanted to bring out through the book, the destruction caused by technology and mass digital media. In the book, with the advancement of technology comes the rise of television, “beetles”, and “seashells”. However, instead of being a tool for the betterment of humans, technology has become a weapon capable of causing mass destruction. Take television shows as an example. We see how television has turned into a means of mindless media with the only purpose of entertaining people instead of evoking a deeper thought process. Books are burnt as they are deemed useless by the general public with how one has to think and interpret the words into an actual logical story in one’s mind, making knowledge gained from books limited. On the other hand, all

one has to do when watching television is, well, stare at the moving pictures on the screen without thinking. No interpreting words, no imagining letters into vivid pictures that will dance in your mind, no pondering about the meaning of the book into the wee hours of the night. People lose their critical thinking skills and connections to others due to their overreliance on television, as evident from how Montag's wife fails to answer his question about where she and Montag met. What is so depressing is that even after being warned by Montag about the danger of mindless television watching, his wife just goes back to watching the telly and ignores his desperate pleas.

Worse still, television is not the only instance when technology is shown to be posing a threat to humanity in the book. With the rise of beetles, characters engage in reckless driving for a short moment of thrill. Similar to excessive

television watching, characters like Mildred engage in such hollow activities searching for an instant serotonin boost that is missing from their meaningless life, hence the dangerous car driving to make the characters feel like they are alive. In addition, the seashells that project audio directly to one's ears serve as a blockade between Mildred and the outside world. All she hears is the superficial audio from the television instead of the world around her or her husband. The connection between people is shown to be extremely weak due to their inability to talk to others with the hindrance of technology like the seashell. The destructive nature of technology is again highlighted by how it will damage the interpersonal relationship between people as even the closest of relationships of husband and wife can be severed through technology.

I remember being made fun of throughout my life for liking to read. Bookworm, nerd, and even a loser are just some of the hundreds of names I have been called for reading in front of my peers. On the first day of secondary school, the moment I fished out Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief out of my bag, everyone in the class stared at me like I grew a second head. Their eyes widened in shock and one even asked me if I could actually understand it. I could never understand why I was being made fun of or why I was ostracised by my own peers for liking to read. It was not until one day when I stared at the world around me that I realised the reason – no one reads anymore. Everyone was scrolling through social media on their phone or was watching the latest episode of Black Mirror on their phone with their ears plugged with their AirPods, but never a book in their hand. Even those who read were reading it with their tablets or kindle.

That was when I realised, we are the firefighters.

We are the people who are burning books and erasing literature through our weapons called phones and tablets. The warning in the book has become true without us even realising. All everyone is doing now with the surplus of frivolous television shows is turning off their brains and watching the pictures move. We are blocking the beauty of listening with artificial music playing in our ears. We are abandoning the different smells, weights, and textures of each book for a Kindle with cold, harsh words. Look at social media. It allows us to filter out what we wish to see and what we do not want others to see. We control the exchange of information through a simple click of a button. We can erase literature with hundreds of years of history by just telling others to “cancel” the book on social media platforms like Twitter instead of treasuring the power it has to allow us to

understand the culture and the norms from hundreds of years ago. This is the danger of technology that the book is trying to warn us about, and the daunting truth is that it has become a reality.

The power of Fahrenheit 451 lies in how the message remains relevant even after 70 years. The irony is that even now, I am using my computer to type out this entry, reading the book through my phone and playing music with my iPad. I call myself a reader, a book lover, yet I am also a firefighter that is subconsciously helping the destruction of literature and reading printed books. The warning of the danger in technology is why Fahrenheit 451 is regarded as the piece de resistance of literature. In our society full of the bombardment of technology, this book has become an essential read for all to remind ourselves not to be another firefighter, but to be like Montag who learns about the beauty of books.



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