The Fifties

As much as *Fahrenheit 451* is about a time in the not-too-distant future, Ray Bradbury's novel is anchored in the 1950s. Mildred Montag sits like a zombie in front of a telescreen. The sound of jet fighters crosses the sky in preparation for war. A neighborhood sits full of cookie-cutter houses and the complacent souls who live in them. All of these would have been familiar scenes to a writer at work in 1953.

The era following World War II in the United States was known for its productivity, its affluence, and its social conformity. The economy was strong. The technology of television, air travel, and the transistor brought the future to the front stoop. The neighborhood Montag lives in probably looks a lot like Levittown, the famous low-cost housing developments of the age that ushered in the rise of suburbia.

Although the 1950s are remembered as a decade of peace and prosperity, they were anything but. The Korean War, which ended in the year that *Fahrenheit 451* was published, saw tens of thousands of American deaths. The larger Cold War that lingered was a source of constant anxiety. In the new atomic age, everyone was learning that the world could be destroyed with the push of a button, a fate Bradbury more than hints at in his novel.

Not only were governments endowed with nuclear weapons, they exercised the power to persecute suspected enemies closer to home. The congressional House Committee on Un-American Activities began investigating suspected espionage in 1946, and within a few years Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin was charging, without evidence, that dozens of government officials were Communist Party members. Meanwhile, memories of Nazi book burnings and Soviet censorship were still fresh in people's minds.

As a result, censorship was alive and well in the media. Communists were assailed in the press. Comic books were condemned as subversive by parents and educators. Images of the "organization man" and the "lonely crowd" reflected changes in the American spirit.

For all their prosperity and rising expectations, the 1950s were a decade of atomic tests and regional wars; racial segregation; government censorship and persecution; subtly enforced social orthodoxy; and building angst. The social and psychological problems of the era are watchfully scrutinized in *Fahrenheit 451,* a book that examines an intolerant society that seems oddly un-American in its penchant for censorship and governmental control.