

Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Joel Lane

No 4: Use Your Characters

In the fourth short story master-class article, Birmingham writer Joel Lane looks at the evocative way in which eminent American science-fiction writer Ray Bradbury uses his characters in his short stories.

All fiction is about people. The best writers use characters not only to carry the story, but to provide a window into the world the characters live in. This is just as important whether you are writing about a realistic situation or creating an imaginary world of fantasy or science fiction. By using characters to explore their world, you not only anchor your story in recognisable human behaviour, you also place the characters at the centre of what your story is saying. The short stories of Ray Bradbury are fine examples of how powerful this approach can be.

Ray Bradbury is a master of the weird and unusual. His collections of short stories combine elements of crime, horror and science fiction. They have two consistent features. Firstly, a use of characters to deal with issues of human nature. Secondly, a style of writing that follows the emotional shifts in his characters through changes in tone and atmosphere. Bradbury is the poet laureate of mood swings. He can take you from childlike euphoria to icy despair within a paragraph.

Bradbury was born in Illinois in 1920. His first collection, *Dark Carnival* (1947), created a world of private fears within small-town America. In these stories, human loneliness, poverty and the loss of hope opened a crack in the world through which the darkness of the eternal could be seen. Most of these stories were included, in revised form, in his 1956 collection *The October Country*. In between, he developed a vein of allegorical science fiction that used images of the future to comment on racism, McCarthyism and the Cold War.

Bradbury's later work has been less disturbing, but the darkness is never far below the surface. Collections such as *Long After Midnight* (1976) and *Quicker Than*

the Eye (1996) show a haunted writer struggling to come to terms with loss and mortality. His most recent book, *From the Dust Returned* (2001), links together several of his early stories – including ‘Homecoming’, a tale of a strange family that was illustrated by Charles Addams in the 1940s, and may have inspired the creation of the Addams Family. Writers influenced by Bradbury include Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell and Stephen King.

To illustrate how Bradbury uses characters to explore their world, I’d like to examine two stories in *The October Country*. Both stories begin somewhere familiar and end somewhere very strange. And both stories are really about human loneliness.

In ‘The Emissary’, a seriously ill child relies on his pet dog to bring him messages from the outside world. The dog carries leaves, grass and seeds to Martin’s bedside – and brings friends, among whom the schoolteacher Miss Haight is the most important. Then Miss Haight is killed in a car crash. Alone in his room, ‘bleached’ by disease, Martin feels the world has died. His dog goes out and doesn’t come back. Then, several nights later, Martin hears him barking in the distance. The bark grows and fades, as if he were circling, leading someone nearer. Someone who opens the house door for him, and follows him very slowly up the stairs in the dark ...

Because Bradbury has expressed Martin’s isolation so vividly, the effect of his story is not so much horror as a terrible sadness. The quiet narration, with its repeated phrases and autumnal tones, builds up an intensity that is hard to shake off. The story leads us into a borderland between faith and despair. Through his focus on the boy’s character, Bradbury shines a torch into the mysterious depths of human nature.

In ‘The Scythe’, a farmer drives his starving family to California during the Great Depression. On the way, they pass a farmhouse. Desperate for food, they stop to beg for help. The old farmer is alone in his house, dead. The family decide to stay and look after the farm. The young farmer finds a scythe and starts cutting the wheat that grows in strange, uneven patterns. He begins to realise that the wheat represents human lives. In order to save his family, he stops reaping. Then the house burns down – and he finds his wife and children asleep, neither dead nor alive. Driven mad by grief, he starts cutting down the wheat at random. It’s the start of the Second World War. As bombs fall and communities are wiped out, the farmer goes on ‘chopping the green wheat instead of the ripe’. And he’s been doing it ever since.

This is the first of Bradbury’s anti-war stories, and perhaps the darkest. Once again, he is using recognisable characters not only to make the story convincing, but

to make a point about human nature. The strangeness of the events contrasts with the realistic narration. The penniless farmer and his family could have driven straight out of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It's hardly their fault that they stumble into a world of Biblical judgements. Bradbury's polemic is tempered with compassion for the people he describes. But at the same time, he avoids any simplistic or comforting moral.

In the prologue to his collection *The Illustrated Man* (1952), Bradbury describes a man whose body is covered with tattoos that tell stories. His own stories read like episodes from a single narrative: sometimes tender, sometimes bleak, sometimes romantic, sometimes bitter. What links them is his focus on human experience. This is made possible by his use of characters to explore their world – both the outer world they live in, and the inner world of their needs, fears and dreams.

Bradbury's approach is a liberating one. It enables him to reveal mystery and magic just below the surface of everyday life. It shows us that the worlds of imagination and reality cannot be separated. By using the characters to explore their world, you can ground your own imagination in a familiar reality – and then find unexpected directions in which to take the story. You'll be surprised where you end up.

© Joel Lane, 2001

JOEL LANE's tales of darkness and suspense have appeared in many anthologies and magazines. He is the author of a collection of short stories, *The Earth Wire* (Egerton Press, 1994); a collection of poems, *The Edge of the Screen* (Arc, 1999); and two novels, *From Blue To Black* and *The Blue Mask* (Serpent's Tail, 2000 and 2003). He is co-editor of *Birmingham Noir*, an anthology of 'dark, smoky tales of a city's underworld' (Tindal Street Press, 2002) and has edited *Beneath the Ground*, an anthology of supernatural tales (Alchemy Press, 2002).

Born in 1920, RAY BRADBURY has a portfolio of notable novels including *Fahrenheit 451* (1951), *Dandelion Wine* (1957) and *Death is a Lonely Business* (1985). But he is primarily regarded as a short-story writer and stories such as 'The Day It Rained Forever' and 'R Is For Rocket' have been hailed as among the finest examples of this genre.