

# Reflections from the Man Who Landed on the Moon in 1929

by Ray Bradbury

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I'd like to start with a story which is apropos of nothing whatsoever. But it happens to be true and I love to tell it. I have lived in Los Angeles for roughly 35 years. I came here when I was a kid with my parents, and I was movie-struck. I put on my roller skates and went out to Paramount Studios. I got out there and I thought, "Oh boy, I'm going to see movie stars! Beautiful!" And there, standing in front of the studio, were three gentlemen—Ben Bernie, an orchestra leader; Irvin S. Cobb, the writer; and the hero of all of us, Mr. W. C. Fields. Well, I tell you, he was as much of a hero to my generation as to the generation coming up today. I ran up to him and said, "Mr. Fields, can I have your autograph?" He took the pad and pencil, signed, handed them back to me and said, "There you are, you little son of a bitch."

I've tried terribly hard to live up to that name because it isn't every day of your life you're knighted by a man like that.

Well, here I am—a writer of science fiction, whatever that term means. I find that I'm a writer of mythologies, actually, and that over a period of years I've been able to come up with the metaphors which represented certain ideas that I saw around me in my own time. I'm a child of the technological age. I'm a child of the machineries that surround us. I'm a child of the Space Age. And what's more natural that in growing up I would care about these ideas? I find them fascinating, irresistible; there *is* no other fiction to write. It always aggravates me that people don't realize that sometimes fiction is at the center of events—and has been for the last 40 or 50 years. I think a lot of you have been provoked into thinking about science on many levels by the sort of work that you read when you were a child.

My first encounter with scientific ideas was in the old pages of *Amazing Stories* in 1928. In 1929 Buck Rogers came on the scene, and I went mad with seeing him every day of my life. These pivotal dreams that occur to us at a young age are so important, and are so often ignored. As educationalists, as teachers, as writers we forget the seedbed that we came from. So I was excited by the primitive exercises of scientific ideas that I found locked into the science fiction magazines, into Buck Rogers, into Flash Gordon. Thus, when I began to write stories when I was 12 years old, the first thing I did was take a man off and land him on the moon! What was more natural?

I gave up writing about landing on the moon more than 35 years ago, when I was 14. I wanted to go from there

to other places. I flew off to Mars. I wrote a whole book called *The Martian Chronicles* without knowing that I was writing it. I just wrote a series of stories over a period of years—various kinds of poetic fancies that seized and shook me. Then I went off to New York to sell a book of stories to Doubleday but they said, “Well, if you don’t have a novel to give us, we can’t publish your short stories. Short stories don’t sell.”

I went back to the YMCA that night. It was a hot summer evening—20 years ago this month. I sat at my typewriter and began to make lists of all the stories I had written over the years, and they began to fall together. Suddenly I realized that I had written 25 short stories about the planet Mars. I began to reassemble them on the page and retype the titles. The next day I went to Doubleday and said, “Hey, you know what I did last night in the middle of the night? I wrote a novel, *The Martian Chronicles*. Here’s the outline. What do you think?” They bought the book right then and there. By the end of summer I had finished retyping and fusing all of these stories that my subconscious had handed me as a very special gift.

That’s the way I work. I’m an emotionalist; I’m an intuitive writer. I never know what I’m doing from one day to the next. These ideas run up and beg to be born. They seize me; they shake me; and they put me down two hours later when the story is finished.

Let me give you a few other examples of the sort of thing in our society that provokes and fascinates me. If President Roosevelt 35 years ago had tried to put a law through Congress outlawing money, he would have been out of his job and out in the cold the next day, wouldn’t he? But we are living in this remarkable time where through our technologies, through new types of inventions, through new types of computers, money is vanishing from the earth. It’s a fascinating thing to watch. Very few people ever comment on it, and I think if you could get people to sit down and discuss it logically, we would realize that there are days that go by (even if we have money in the bank—and let’s imagine that we *do* have some, hm? . . . after taxes) when we just never use cash. If we travel, especially, we take that credit card with us.

The credit card is going to dominate our lives more and more. This conception of the credit card came into being about 100 years ago. (I believe it was mentioned for the first time, as far as I remember, in Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*.) But when we read that as science fiction when I was a kid, we thought, “Oh, it will be years



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before anything of this sort happens, when we live by faith alone." But suddenly we've moved into this age of faith. Because it *is* an act of faith, just as accepting a check is an act of faith, isn't it?

Now, within 20 years money will have vanished from the world completely, and everyone will just carry the little credit card around. When you want a Fresca or a Coca-Cola or what have you, you will just put this little thing in the machine, the machine will record your signature and computer number. This will be sent to the bank. At the bank they will just change some figures, move the decimal a point one way or the other. Now, that's fantastic—that money would absolutely vanish from the world, and we would all sit calmly by and not comment on it and be astonished at this new age of faith and trust that is coming upon us. Talk about your revolutions!

When this fact reaches its completion in 20 years, crime must change. That means all of you who plan careers of holding up liquor stores will have to find some other occupation. You won't be able to go in and burgle a liquor store and go out with the money. You'll have to drink your way to the exit.

Let me give you another broad idea. We never dreamt, did we, 30 years ago that the face of war would be so completely changed, that a weapon—a science-fictional weapon utterly impossible 30 years ago—would come along and change the way we use politics and war? It used to be that war was an extension of politics. Now we find that technologies are becoming extensions of politics, that we no longer make war on a large scale. The major nations of the world are engaged in little guerrilla activities here and there. Vietnam, as much as it dominates our thinking, is not an immense war. It's a very small one—the reason being that the hydrogen bomb came along as the most Christian teacher of the most Christian principles in the history of the world, and like it or not, it made Christians of us *all!*

What did the hydrogen bomb say to us in a very soft voice so that all the world could hear? "Everyone sit down." And we've *been* sitting mainly, you know. We've been *sitting*.

Think of any war that has occurred during the last 25 years: Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East. Less than these provoked gigantic wars in the past. Such provocations no longer provoke. Now we fiddle about with little guerrilla activities all because of this thing standing over us in our time. I don't know how long this balance of power will stay. My own feeling is that it will last for several

hundred years, and hopefully for a thousand years, while we all teach each other some sort of Christian principles to live by. I am hopeful that each of the small wars that grows will be snuffed out in turn, even as the Korean War was snuffed out.

But this is a science-fictional idea. This is the sort of thing that fascinates me when I see politics changing before my eyes, when I see that the peoples of the world who loved to live by political principles can't live by them any longer. We are witnessing the proliferation of technological ideas in all of the major countries of the world, so that we will all meet at a peak, beautifully covered with smog, within 30 years. My favorite date will be that magical date when Red China and the United States discover how much alike they are; and that will be the day, 25 years from now, when Mao Tse-tung's grandson drives into Peking and can't find a parking place for his goddamned car.

So, like it or not, we're all being victimized by our machines, and all of our major problems are science-fictional problems. You name a problem and I'll name the machine responsible for it. Almost everything that's wrong with our country today is the result of a machine doing something in the wrong way. I'd say 9 out of 10 problems, at least, have something to do with the malfunctioning of a technology somewhere down the line. Our cities are being destroyed by cars. We all know this. The whole country's being destroyed by the automobile. Last year we put four million people in the hospital with the automobile. Now that's fantastic. That's a major war we're fighting here. It turns out that the war in Vietnam is small in comparison to the technological warfare we have here at home. So, naturally, I'm going to write about it. I'm going to be interested in this.

Let me give you some other ideas that I've been concerned with. I was speaking of the credit card, and I'm fascinated with the fact that with the proliferation of the credit card in the next few years the vast middle class will become the aristocracy of all time. And one of the things the middle class is going to do that no other class has ever done is travel. This is the privileged group. The total population of our country will be privileged in another 20 years. We will be sending people all over the world. In fact, it's an old idea, isn't it, and not fresh with me—the idea of sending a million of our students every year to all the countries of the world to study and bringing millions of students here to study, so that we begin to understand that we all have the *same* problems.

The idea is this, though—that when we have credit established, we can borrow from the future. I think the history of the world will show that *FDR* and people around him were wonderful people if for only one thing—they knew how to borrow from the future in order to make work now. In many of the countries of the world that I've visited, I see that rocks are not being moved, roads are not being repaired, factories are not being built because of the inability of the government to say we will borrow some sort of credit from day after tomorrow to make these people move today. Because after all money *is* fantasy anyway, and always has been.

So the credit system is a magical thing, isn't it? You make a mysterious promise about tomorrow, and you give the money to the people here today so the work gets done, and you're automatically made rich by this activity. So, the generations to follow us will, with their credit cards, go off and travel the world and come back with all this knowledge and pay off on the debt.

I don't know how many of you know, but back about 16 years ago, I wrote a screenplay of *Moby Dick* for John Huston, so I got to be on very familiar terms with Herman Melville and with that whale and with the whole mythology of Melvillian concepts. Over the years since, I've written much poetry, and I've begun to write some plays dealing with the subject of *Moby Dick* and the future; and I thought it might be fascinating to try a few pages on you here to show you the sort of thing I'm up to. I've tried to carry the mythology of Melville ahead 200 years to roughly the year 2199 when rocket ships are moving further out in space.

My play starts in this way, surprisingly enough:

“Call me Ishmael.

“Ishmael in this year 2199 when strange new ships sail towards the stars instead of under them, attack the stars instead of fearing them? A name like Ishmael?

“Yes, my parents *flew with the first brave ones to Mars*. Turned less than brave, gone sick for earth, they turned back home. Conceived in that journey, I was born in space. A child so birthed in desolations, homeless between yestermorrow and noon's midnight must have a proper name. My father knew his Bible and recalled another out-cast who wandered dead seas long years before Christ. And I being so far the only child conceived, fleshed, and delivered forth in space, how better to name me than as my father did, touching the dark warmth where I hid in the days before my birth. And he did, indeed, call me Ishmael.”

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And Ishmael boards a rocket craft and signs on to go off into space. In terms of Melville it was the ships seeking the whales and Ahab seeking the white whale. In my story it’s the story of a blind captain of space who had his vision rubbed out 40 years before by a great trailing midnight presence that came down through our basement part of the universe—a great comet called Leviathan. And now my captain is going back out to strike through the mystery of the comet, to make do with it, to *destroy his destroyer*. But before they go out into space, all the men from the rocket ship go to hear a church service on the morning before they leave.

“In the pulpit at the center of the spaceman’s chapel stands a man who had died 100 years before. Dead, yes, but so remarkable a man was he that they did computerize his soul. That is, they did up his voice on tapes, made circuitries of his merest breath and motion—then locked it all in plastic flesh and steel. So now before us stood Father Ellory Coleworth. A monster robot? No. Gentle essence of the man. And he speaks. ‘Is God dead? An old question now, but once hearing it I laughed and replied, “No, not dead but simply sleeping till you chattering bores shut up.” A better answer is: *Are you dead? Does the blood move in your hand? Does your hand move to touch metal? Does the metal move to touch space? Do wild thoughts of travel and migration move behind your flesh? They do! You live. Therefore He lives. You are the thin skin of life upon an unsensing earth. You are that growing edge of God which manifests itself in hungers for space. So much of God lies vibrantly asleep. The very stuffs of worlds and galaxies they know not themselves. God reaches for the stars. You are His hand. Creation manifest, you go in search. He goes to find, you go to find Himself. Everything you find along the way, therefore, will be holy. On far worlds you will meet your own flesh, terrifying and strange, but still your own. Treat it well. Beneath the shape you share the Godhead.’ ”*

There you get some of my ideas on how I feel about space travel. I have been excited by it constantly, of course, since I was a child, and I was privileged last July to be in London on the night when we landed on the moon; so I was asked over by David Frost to appear on his evening TV show around 9:30 p.m. London time.

I listened to the landing on the moon. I was in tears most of the evening—certainly one of the greatest nights in all of my life, a night I had been waiting for since I was 8, 9, 10 years old. Well, I waited an hour or so after the landing for David Frost to call me out on the show.

But *first* he introduced that great space expert, Engelbert Humperdinck.

And then he introduced that other great space expert, Sammy Davis, Jr.

I began to feel somehow the evening was going awry. I began to get a little sick to my stomach. I went out on the sidewalk. The producer came out. He said, “Mr. Bradbury, what are you doing out here?”

I said, “I think I’m looking for a taxi.”

He said, “You can’t leave, you can’t leave. You’re going to be on any moment.”

I said, “Yes, but I don’t like you people. You see, I don’t like you. I think you’ve taken the greatest night in the history of mankind and destroyed it. Take your hand off my elbow. Find me a taxicab. Keep your money. And goodnight.”

So I left. If you’ll forgive my arrogance and my lack of humble, the newspaper the next morning said, “Armstrong walks at midnight. Bradbury walks at one o’clock.” I was rather proud of that. It was a very small step for me.

Anyway, I went over to NBC, and waiting for me there in the studio was a panel of people—the Bishop of Geneva, Lord Ritchie Calder, and Bernadette Devlin. Well, my God, I’ve never heard so much lamentation. You’d think we were at a funeral. And listening to all these intellectuals, suddenly I get more anti-intellectual by the minute! The Bishop wasn’t happy about the landing on the moon. Lord Ritchie Calder had *his* doubts, and Bernadette Devlin was lamenting that all that money wasn’t going into the north of Ireland.

I turned on all three of them. I said, “Now look. Everyone shut up. You don’t know a damned thing about what’s going on here tonight, and that’s why people like myself are needed in the world. I want to tell you what in hell it means. This is the *greatest* night you will ever know!

“There are two nights the Western world will look back upon a million years from tonight. A million years! I’m not talking about a hundred or a thousand years. I’m talking about a million years from tonight.

“The birth of Christ probably is a very important date that changed the world in many ways for the better and, in some ways, for not very much good at all.

“But the second most important date is this night that we’re going through right now. Because it’s the night when

we become immortal—when we begin the steps that will enable us to live forever. Now, if you don't know this, you don't know anything about space.

“To hell with all the political talk. To hell with all the military talk. To hell with all this nonsense that you're giving me about the funds and priorities and all this. The money that's spent on this is miniscule compared to the money wasted on our war efforts the last 10 or 15 years.

“Give me the pittance to work with because I have long views, and I want you to have the long views with me; and the long view is this—at the center of all of our theologies, at the center of all of our philosophies for thousands of years, people have said, ‘Why live? Why bother? What's the use if we're going to stay here and die and our philosophies be buried and stuffed in our mouths? What's the use? What is it all about?’

“Suddenly the space ship comes along—the gift we give ourselves and the total race and the gift of life, as mysterious as it is. We've been trying to figure it out for thousands of years now. We've had to take it on faith from the theologians and on data from the scientists, and we are still so ignorant.

“We are still the ape man in the cave, and we have this torch given us—the rocket ship. Now, for God's sake, we use it to light the universe with. We don't know what's out there. We know it's pretty empty. And our part of the universe is full of us and this gift.

“I want that gift to go on. I want mirror images of myself and my children's children's children to go on. All of you. Now, we can't stay here and die, that's for sure. We are a danger to ourselves. We must go off to other worlds. We will go to the moon. We will go to Mars. We will go beyond Jupiter. We will be going beyond our own solar system and eventually, sometime in the next 100, 500, 1,000 years, we will build those starcraft we've been speaking of and head for stars so far away they are impossible to imagine.

“That's what it's all about. It's huge. It's a long-range thing. And the things that we do here on earth right now are housekeeping. I want to do them *both!* I want to clean up the house and improve the civil disputes and help the people, but help them also to survive not for 100 years, not for 1,000 years but for the 2 billion years that will be the Age of Apollo which opens before us this very instant. Is that enough answer for you?” And I shut up.

And their lamentations ended.

And they were silent.

