

IU INDIANAPOLIS
COMMON READ



RAY BRADBURY'S
**THE
ILLUSTRATED MAN**

READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE

Welcome to the 2026 Indianapolis Common Read

Stories have the power to bring people together. They help us explore new ideas, understand different perspectives, and engage in conversations about the questions that shape our lives and communities. The IU Indianapolis Common Read was created to foster those connections through a shared reading experience that invites people across Central Indiana to read the same book and participate in meaningful dialogue.

Led by IU Indianapolis in partnership with the Ray Bradbury Center, libraries, schools, community organizations, and cultural institutions across the region, the Common Read encourages readers of all ages and backgrounds to come together around a common text. Through book discussions, educational programs, community events, and personal reflection, participants are invited to engage with ideas that matter and to discover how literature can connect us across generations, professions, and perspectives.

Why *The Illustrated Man*? Why now?

For the 2026 Common Read, we have selected Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, a collection of eighteen interconnected short stories that continue to resonate more than seventy-five years after their publication. While Bradbury wrote about rockets, robots, automated homes, and journeys to distant planets, his stories are ultimately about people and the choices we make.

Imagine...

...waking up and realizing your house knows you better than your family does.

...replacing yourself with a robot so you no longer must go to work – or come home.

...discovering the world will end tonight.

The collection's short-story format provides many entry points for readers. Whether you read a single story or the entire book, each offers opportunities to reflect on the human experience and engage in conversations that connect the past, present, and future.

How to Use This Guide

This Reading and Discussion Guide is designed to help readers engage more deeply with *The Illustrated Man* and connect its themes to contemporary issues and personal experiences.

The guide may be used by:

- High school and college classrooms
- Community and workplace book clubs
- Libraries and reading groups
- Families and intergenerational discussion groups
- Individual readers seeking deeper reflection

Within these pages, you will find:

- Background information on Ray Bradbury and *The Illustrated Man*
- Discussion questions for individuals and groups
- Reflection prompts that encourage personal connections
- Activities designed for classrooms, book clubs, and community settings
- Opportunities to explore themes of technology, imagination, community, family, hope, and the future

There is no "right" way to use this guide. You may focus on a single story, explore a specific theme, or use the questions to spark conversation among readers with different experiences and viewpoints. Our hope is that the guide helps transform reading into dialogue and dialogue into connection.

Thank you for joining the 2026 IU Indianapolis Common Read. We invite you to read, reflect, discuss, and share your perspective as we explore together what Ray Bradbury's enduring stories can teach us about ourselves, our communities, and the future we are creating together.



Use this QR code to register for the November 10, 2026 Indianapolis Community Conversation about *The Illustrated Man*.

One City. One Book. Many Perspectives. Join the Conversation.

About Ray Bradbury

Ray Bradbury was one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century. He was born in 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois. His writing combines science fiction, fantasy, horror, humor, and social criticism. His best-known books include *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Dandelion Wine*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

Bradbury wrote about rockets, robots, automated homes, simulated worlds, alien planets, and future wars. But he was not mainly interested in predicting new inventions or explaining how they worked. He used imagined futures to explore human choices.

His stories ask questions that still matter today:

- What do we value?
- What do we fear?
- What happens when technology gives us what we want but weakens our judgment?
- What might we lose when convenience replaces responsibility?
- How can moral imagination help us understand people whose experiences differ from our own?

Note: Moral imagination is the ability to imagine another person's experience and think carefully about what is right. Bradbury's stories often ask readers to practice this skill.

Historical and Cultural Context

The Illustrated Man was published in 1951, near the beginning of the Cold War. Americans were excited by new technology but also afraid of what it might do. Rockets offered the promise of space exploration, but they could also carry weapons. Household machines promised greater comfort, but they could make people dependent on them. Television and advertising were changing family life, politics, and consumer habits. Nuclear weapons made the end of the world seem possible in a new and frightening way.

The stories reflect many concerns of the period, including nuclear war, mass media, racism, censorship, consumer culture, pressure to conform, space exploration, and fear of the future.

Bradbury does not simply argue that technology is bad. Instead, he asks what happens when people carry old human problem such as greed, loneliness, racism, violence, distraction, fear, and the desire for control into a world of powerful new technology.

About the Collection

The Illustrated Man is a collection of short stories connected by a framing story. A framing story is an outer story that introduces and connects several smaller stories. The narrator meets a mysterious man whose body is covered with moving illustrations. Each illustration comes alive and reveals a different possible future.

The book works like a gallery. Each story can be read on its own, but the stories also speak to one another. Together, they explore technology, imagination, family, justice, war, faith, loneliness, and what it means to be human.

Note: You do not have to begin with the first story or read every story. A class, family, book club, or community group can choose stories connected to the issues that interest them most.

Questions to Keep in Mind

- What happens in this story, and why does it matter?
- Who makes an important choice? What are the results?
- What human problem does the story reveal?
- What warning, hope, or question does Bradbury leave with the reader?
- How does the story connect to something in the world or in your own life today?

Choose a Story: A Quick Reading Menu

The descriptions below offer a starting point and theme for many of the stories in *The Illustrated Man* without revealing the endings. Groups may choose one story, build a theme-based set, or read the complete collection.

STORY	WHAT TO WATCH FOR	THEMES
"The Veldt"	A family's high-tech home begins to control family life.	Technology, parenting, attention, responsibility
"Marionettes, Inc."	A man uses a robotic double to escape his responsibilities.	AI, replacement, authenticity, relationships
"The Rocket Man"	A family struggles with a father's love of space travel.	Work, family, ambition, sacrifice
"The Rocket"	A father tries to give his family an experience they cannot afford.	Dreams, social class, imagination, family
"The Exiles"	Banned writers and imaginary characters fight to survive.	Censorship, books, memory, imagination
"The Concrete Mixer"	A visitor discovers that consumer culture can be its own form of conquest.	Advertising, conformity, consumption
"The Last Night of the World"	An ordinary couple believes the world will end that night.	Fear, love, routine, mortality
"Kaleidoscope"	Astronauts face death while drifting apart in space.	Isolation, regret, meaning, human connection
"The Highway"	A farmer sees a crisis that seems distant from his own life.	Perspective, inequality, disaster
"The Fox and the Forest"	A couple tries to escape a future shaped by war.	War, freedom, memory, consequences
"The Other Foot"	Black settlers on Mars prepare for the arrival of white refugees from Earth.	Racism, revenge, justice, repair
"The Man"	Travelers search for a mysterious figure who has transformed a community.	Faith, humility, recognition, difference
"The Visitor"	People in exile respond to someone with an unusual gift.	Loneliness, illness, power, belonging

THEME 1

Technology, AI, and Human Responsibility

Stories to consider: “The Veldt,” “Marionettes, Inc.,” “The Rocket Man,” “The Rocket”

In these stories, technology does more than help people. It begins to shape family life, identity, work, and personal responsibility. Bradbury asks what happens when machines give people what they want before they have asked whether they should want it.

TALK FIRST

Name one technology you use almost every day

**INTERSECTIONS
WITH TODAY**

Artificial Intelligence, smart homes, virtual reality, automation, data privacy, academic integrity, and human agency.

Discussion Path**START HERE**

Which piece of technology has the greatest effect on the characters? Is that effect mostly helpful, harmful, or both?

LOOK CLOSER

Choose one moment when a character gives up responsibility to a machine. What happens next?

**CONNECT TO
TODAY**

What technologies today make life easier but may also change our habits, values, or relationships?

GO DEEPER

Who is responsible when technology causes harm: The user, the designer, the company, the government, or society as a whole?

Watch For...

- What disappears when a story is no longer read?
- Why does imagination threaten people who want control?
- What is the difference between forgetting, choosing, and forbidding?

Try an Activity

- Create a “responsibility map” for one of the stories. List each person or group that shares responsibility for what happens in the story.
- Write a short set of rules for using the story’s technology safely.
- Create a product advertisement for a technology introduced in one of these stories and then add a second panel that identifies the hidden cost that the ad does not acknowledge.

Reflections

THEME 2

Replacement, Imitation, and Authenticity

Stories to consider: “The Veldt,” “Marionettes, Inc.”

Bradbury explores fears that feel familiar in the age of AI: being replaced, being copied, depending too much on machines, and losing human connection. In “Marionettes, Inc.,” a human double appears to solve one problem while creating deeper moral and emotional problems.

TALK FIRST

One word check-in: What makes a person irreplaceable?

**INTERSECTIONS
WITH TODAY**

Generative AI, deepfakes, synthetic companions, workplace automation, AI-assisted writing, and labor displacement.

Discussion Path**START HERE**

Why are the characters tempted to use technology to avoid a difficult responsibility or relationship?

LOOK CLOSER

What does the machine copy well? What can it not truly relate?

**CONNECT TO
TODAY**

What kinds of human work or relationships should not be handed over to machines, even if it becomes possible?

GO DEEPER

Does fear of replacement tell us more about technology or about the way society values people?

Watch for...

- Details that make the imitation convincing
- What the machine can copy, and what it cannot
- The responsibility a character is trying to avoid

Try an Activity

- Make two lists: “What can be copied?” and “What makes a person unique?” Use evidence from the story.
- Write a warning label that should come with the technology in the story.

Reflections

THEME 3

Censorship, Memory, and the Power of Stories**Stories to consider:** “The Exiles”

Bradbury is deeply concerned with what societies choose to remember, destroy, ignore, or make fun of. “The Exiles” imagines banned authors and imaginary characters trying to survive after their books have been destroyed on Earth. The story asks readers to think about censorship as more than removing books. It can also narrow imagination and limit the ideas people are able to consider.

TALK FIRST

Name one book, story, or character that has stayed with you. What would be lost if others could never encounter it?

**INTERSECTIONS
WITH TODAY**

Book bans, school curricula, libraries, misinformation, intellectual freedom, and digital erasure.

Discussion Path**START HERE**

What is lost when the books in “The Exiles” disappear?

LOOK CLOSER

Why might stories involving fantasy, horror, satire, or strange ideas threaten people who want control?

**CONNECT TO
TODAY**

What is the difference between choosing not to read a book and preventing other people from reading it?

GO DEEPER

What responsibilities do schools, universities, and libraries have when a book is difficult, unsettling, or controversial?

Watch for...

- What disappears when a story is no longer read
- Why imagination threatens people who want control
- The difference between forgetting, choosing, and forbidding

Try an Activity

- Choose one banned or challenged book and research why it was challenged. Compare that debate with Bradbury's concerns.
- Create a one-minute defense of imagination: Why do communities need stories that are strange, uncomfortable, or challenging?

Reflections

THEME 4

Consumerism, Comfort, and Distraction

Stories to consider: “The Concrete Mixer,” “The Veldt”

Several stories show people becoming so entertained, comfortable, or distracted that they stop thinking carefully or acting responsibly. Bradbury does not reject comfort. He warns that comfort becomes dangerous when it weakens empathy, curiosity, courage, or independence.

TALK FIRST

What captured most of your attention today before you began reading?

**INTERSECTIONS
WITH TODAY**

Social media, advertising, influencer culture, convenience, consumer identity, and the attention economy.

Discussion Path**START HERE**

What do the characters want, buy, or consumer? Does it make them happier?

LOOK CLOSER

Find a moment when comfort or entertainment keeps a character from noticing a serious problem.

**CONNECT TO-
TODAY**

How do companies today compete for people’s attention, emotions, and spending?

GO DEEPER

How can criticism or rebellion itself be turned into something to sell?

Watch for...

- What characters are encouraged to want or buy
- Moments when entertainment hides a serious problem
- How rebellion or difference is repackaged and sold

Try an Activity

- Design an advertisement for something in the story. Then explain what the advertisement leaves out.
- Keep an “attention diary” for one day. What tries to capture your attention, and what does it ask you to do?
- Create a collage (on paper or digitally) that shows the kinds of things that compete for human attention today. Then connect the collage to one of Bradbury’s stories.

Reflections

THEME 5

War, Fear, and the End of the World

Stories to consider: “The Highway,” “The Last Night of the World,” “Kaleidoscope,” “The Fox and the Forest”

These stories reflect the fear that modern technology has given human beings the power to destroy themselves. Bradbury’s stories about disaster are not only about weapons. They also examine denial, helplessness, regret, love, responsibility, and the challenge of living under a constant threat.

TALK FIRST

One word check-in: How did the story make uncertainty feel?

**INTERSECTIONS
WITH TODAY**

Nuclear risk, climate anxiety, AI risk, war, political instability, pandemics, and disaster preparedness.

Discussion Path**START HERE**

How do the characters response when they believe they may die or lose their world?

LOOK CLOSER

Which ordinary detail becomes especially meaningful during the crisis? Why?

**CONNECT TO
TODAY**

What kinds of fear shape life today? When does fear lead people to act, and when does it stop them from acting?

GO DEEPER

How can communities prepare for uncertain futures without believing that nothing can be changed?

Watch for...

- Ordinary details that become meaningful during crisis
- Whether fear leads to action, denial, or communication
- Whose danger is recognized and whose is treated as distant

Try an Activity

- Write a final message from the point of view of one character.
- Create a community preparedness plan based on one lesson from the story.
- Create a drawing or storyboard of what “the last night of the world” would look like in your community. Focus not just on destruction, but on what people choose to do, notice, or value when time feels limited.

Reflections

THEME 6

Race, Justice, Revenge, or Repair**Stories to consider:** “The Other Foot”

“The Other Foot” addresses racism, segregation, revenge, and the possibility of reconciliation. The story was published before the major legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement. Readers can recognize the power of the story while also asking where Bradbury’s treatment of racial justice may be limited by his time and perspective.

TALK FIRST

Complete the sentence: Justice feels possible when...

**INTERSECTIONS
WITH TODAY**

Racial justice, historical memory, reparations, structural inequality, reconciliation, and restorative justice.

Discussion Path**START HERE**

What emotions shape the community’s response to the new arrivals?

LOOK CLOSER

How does the story represent revenge? Does it reject revenge, understand it, or both?

**CONNECT TO
TODAY**

What does genuine repair require after a group has experienced long-term harm?

GO DEEPER

How should readers respond to an older story that challenges injustice but may also reflect assumptions of its era?

Watch for...

- How historical memory shapes present choices
- The different meanings the characters give to justice
- What the story asks harmed people to release, and what it asks others to repair

Try an Activity

- Identify three different meanings of justice in the story. Which one do you find most convincing?
- Rewrite one scene from the point of view of a character whose thoughts are not fully shown.

Reflections

THEME 7

Faith, Difference, and Humility

Stories to consider: “The Man,” “The Visitor”

These stories ask whether people can recognize truth, goodness, intelligence, or human worth when it appears in an unfamiliar form. Bradbury uses science fiction to explore faith, doubt, loneliness, difference, and the desire to control what we do not understand.

TALK FIRST

One word check-in: What helps you remain curious when something feels unfamiliar?

**INTERSECTIONS
WITH TODAY**

Religious diversity, cultural humility, disability, illness, belonging, extraterrestrial life, and ethics.

Discussion Path**START HERE**

How do the characters respond to a person or experience that do not fully understand?

LOOK CLOSER

Which character shows humility? Which character tries to control the situation?

**CONNECT TO
TODAY**

How do communities respond when someone’s knowledge, beliefs, body, or experiences do not fit familiar categories?

GO DEEPER

What does it mean to approach differences with humility rather than fear, conquest, or control?

Watch for...

- Who listens before judging
- Who tries to control an unfamiliar person or experience
- Moments when certainty blocks recognition or connection

Try an Activity

- Choose one character and write the advice you would give that person before the main conflict begins.
- Create a list of questions that show curiosity and humility when meeting someone whose experience is unfamiliar.
- Draw one symbol that captures the main message of the story. Then explain why they chose the symbol, what it represents, and how it connects to the story's ideas about believe, humility, or human difference.

Reflections
