

The Martian Chronicles by Ray Bradbury recommended by Charles J. Shields

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Charles J. Shields—Barboursville resident and author of *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*—recommends *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



"Rocket summer"...

Whenever I open to the first chapter of Ray Bradbury's 1950 novel, *The Martian Chronicles*, suddenly it is the summer of 1964 and I am a thirteen-year-old boy again in the Midwest, awed by Bradbury's description of rocket exhaust thawing-out an Ohio town in winter:

"The rocket lay on the launching field, blowing out pink clouds of fire and oven heat. The rocket stood in the cold winter morning, making summer with every breath of its mighty exhausts. The rocket made climates, and summer lay for a brief moment upon the land..."

The stage is set for a series of American missions to Mars. This is exactly what I wanted to read about when I was a kid who launched model rockets to do my patriotic part in the Space Race.

But what's this? *The Martian Chronicles* is not a collection of stories about ray guns, alien monsters, or interstellar wars. It's about racism, and imperialism, imported to a pristine civilization on Mars, and the ecological destruction of the planet.

If you don't recall *The Martian Chronicles*, it begins with an American space expedition to the Red Planet. What the spacemen find there is a sophisticated, peaceful civilization resembling ancient Greece. But the golden-eyed Martians aren't interested in visitors, and try to discourage future incursions. Yet settlers from Earth continue to arrive, spurred on by notions of 21st century Manifest Destiny. Within a generation, the Martians are no more, decimated by disease or hunted into the hills. Now the

planet is open to development, and soon Mars is as vulgar-looking as the worst American urban areas. Then nuclear warfare erupts on Earth, and practically all the settlers return home. The only hope lies with those who stay behind, determined to become the "new Martians."

Bradbury can pause to laugh though, too. One of my favorite stories is "The Silent Towns." A settler, Walter, who remains after the exodus to Earth, is lonely. One night, he hears a distant phone ringing. He's too late to answer it, and frantically goes through a phone book calling numbers. Finally, a feminine voice answers. The pair hurry to rendezvous, but the owner of the sylphlike voice, Genevieve, turns out to be immature and love-obsessed. Walter decides solitude has its advantages after all and flees.

Still, I was stunned when I finished the book. Why had the gentle Martians living in their crystal homes been crushed? Wasn't the spread of American values everywhere a good thing? Wasn't it taken for granted that all cultures different from ours were inferior? The realization that *The Martian Chronicles* were parables about how good ol' American know-how was often just arrogance and intolerance really shook me. I never accepted the American Way without question ever again.

Now as we stomp through the Middle East, destroying ancient treasures and deriding peoples' beliefs in the name of spreading democracy, freedom, and better living, *The Martian Chronicles* is relevant once again.

I recommend you pick it up and see.