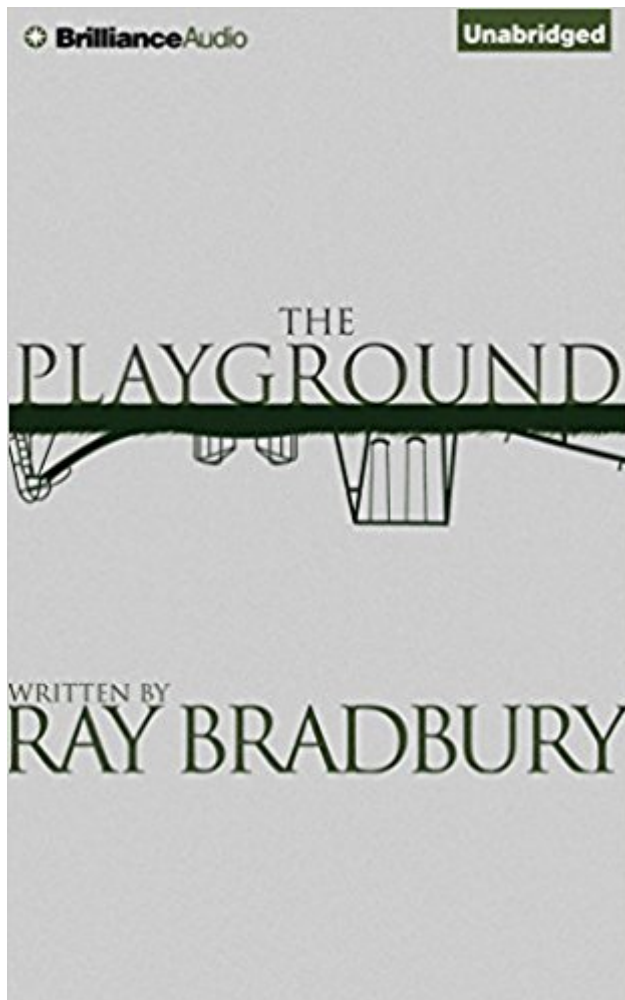


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The Playground



Synopsis

"The Playground" was part of the first hardcover edition of Ray Bradbury's legendary work *Fahrenheit 451*, published in 1953. In the story, Charles Underhill is a widower who will do anything to protect his young son Jim from the horrors of the playground—a playground which he and the boy pass by daily and the tumult of which, the activity, brings back to Charles the anguish of his own childhood. The playground, like childhood itself, is a nightmare of torment and vulnerability; Charles fears his sensitive son will be destroyed there just as he almost was so many years ago. Underhill's sister Carol, who has moved in to help raise the young boy after his mother passed away, feels differently. The playground, she believes, is preparation for life, Jim will survive the experience, she feels, and he will be the better for it and more equipped to deal with the rigor and obligation of adult existence. Underhill is caught between his own fear and his sister's invocation of reason and feels paralyzed. A mysterious boy calls out to him from the playground, and seems to know all too well why Underhill is there and what the source of his agony really is. A mysterious Manager also lurks to whom the strange boy directs Underhill. An agreement can be made perhaps—this is what the boy tells Underhill. Perhaps Jim can be spared the playground, but of course, a substitute must be found.

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Customer Reviews

Ray Bradbury (1920–2012) was the author of more than three dozen books, including *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*, and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, as well as hundreds of short stories. He wrote for the theater, cinema, and TV, including the screenplay for

John Huston's *Moby Dick* and the Emmy Award-winning teleplay *The Halloween Tree*, and adapted for television sixty-five of his stories for The Ray Bradbury Theater. He was the recipient of the 2000 National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, the 2007 Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, and numerous other honors.

The eForward doesn't make this point clear, and my clear memory -- although it's many years since 1954 when I first read the story as a handout with *Fahrenheit 451: A Novel* -- that Charles Underwood and his wife were debating whether their son should be allowed to play in the Playground. I also remember that the playground was more evil, that somehow it absorbed Charles into the body of his son and they changed places through its agency. In this version, Charles's wife is dead, Charles and his sister debate the playground issue, and Charles is not neurotic, but rather heroic in choosing to take his son's place in the hellish place. Whatever the tricks of my memory may be, Bradbury succeeds in this version of the story in capturing the same feeling of dread inherent in ordinary places and events that I remember from almost 60 years ago. Somehow both Charles and to a lesser extent his son and his former neighbor seem entirely real to me; certainly the taunts of the kids and the feeling of the playground equipment has that same tactile reality. It is well worth checking out the TV version of this short story, which has been extensively repeated on YouTube and elsewhere. William Shatner played Charles Underwood, perhaps a bit old for the role, but very effective. The TV version makes the presence of evil a bit more direct; one of the magical parts of the short story is the eerie sense created by the desk in the office with papers lying on top, but no one in the room -- "he's never there". Bradbury is brilliant in making the playground come alive: "At first there seemed absolutely nothing whatever to see. And then as he adjusted his attention outward from his usual interior monologue, the scene before him, a grey, blurred television image, came to a slow focus. Primarily, he was aware of dim voices, faint underwater cries emerging from a series of vague streaks and zigzag lines and shadows. Then, as if someone had kicked the machine, screams jumped at him in full throat, visions leaped clear. ... He weathered the first blast of sound, blinking. His nostrils took over when his eyes and ears retired in panic." Bradbury makes the playground itself an evil character, as real as Charles or his son or his sister or his neighbor. The story scared me 60 years ago; it scared me an hour ago. Robert C. Ross June 2012

I discovered science fiction in the mid-1950s when I was about ten years old. Ray Bradbury quickly became one of my favorite authors. Now, many years later, I'm delighted to see some of his works being republished as ebooks. Although "The Playground" was one of Bradbury's earlier works, it

evokes the same kind of vivid sensory images of later classics like *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. In the story, Charles Underhill is determined to spare his son Jim from the years-long cruelty and suffering of childhood. He would do anything, even trade places with his son if he could. But that meant entering the Playground and being beaten and tormented by the other kids for years. Was the Playground a real place, or was it simply a symbol for the pain of growing up and learning life's lessons the hard way? There was only one way for Charles Underhill to find out. This was a creepy, captivating story told by a master storyteller. We'll miss Ray Bradbury, but his work lives on.

A great read if you have a cup of hot tea...you'll finish before the tea goes cold. I particularly love Bradbury's description of the Playground, the imagery can almost be smelled and touched. The way he weaves this story is a cultural testimony to American childhood, and to parenthood. And having a young son myself, living not far from several playgrounds, this story hit a little close to home. Unfortunately, living in the suburbs means that the biggest scares for my young kids are not the anguishes of this story, but the fears of plastic swings, splinters from wood chips, and runaway scooters. So, enjoy this taste of Bradbury's best, from the safety of your couch and Kindle.

"When you have two precious bits of porcelain and one is broken and the other, the last one, remains, where can you find the time to be objective, to be immensely calm, to be anything else but concerned? No, he thought, walking slowly, in the hall, there seems to be nothing I can do except go on being afraid and being afraid of being afraid." -Charles Underhill Do you remember what it was like to be a kid? The fears of children are varied and this novelette by Ray Bradbury crystallizes the hardship of children through the expressed fear of the Playground by Charlie, the parent, in a tight, disturbing, trippy story that will send a shiver up your spine. "Are all playgrounds like this?" Underhill said. "Some," replied the boy on the playground. "Maybe this is the only one like this. Maybe it's just how you look at it, Charlie. Things are what you want them to be." And in this story, the Playground is hell, the place where children go to be bullied and beaten, and it is this fate, that of living a childhood of torment, that Charlie wants to save his son from experiencing. The bottom line: Mr. Bradbury takes the traditional viewpoint--that childhood is the best time of our lives--and flips this notion on its head, holding a mirror to the reader that says, "No, it isn't! Here's why!" This was my first Ray Bradbury story and it won't be the last. -Raeden Zen

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