

A celebration of youth, summer and life

1957 novel 'Dandelion Wine' is first in a series by Ray Bradbury

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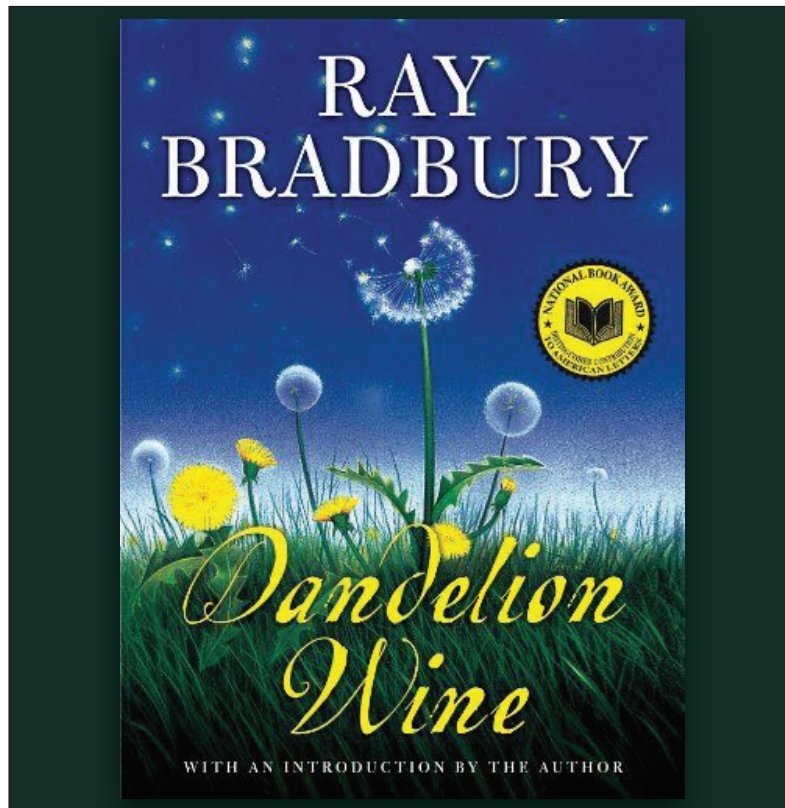
I'll confess — it was the title of this book that intrigued me. Wine made from a weed? This called for some investigation.

In fact, I might not otherwise have selected this one from the school library shelf. Author Ray Bradbury is often associated with sci-fi and fantasy genres — "Fahrenheit 451," "The Martian Chronicles" — not particular favorites of mine.

However, I quickly discovered within the first few pages that the subject here was something dear to my heart and soul — summer. A carefree time, heaping with youthful plans and endless promise — in my opinion, it's the best season of the year.

Let's just say I was sucked in faster than an ice cream cone melting on a hot August day.

The setting for "Dandelion Wine" (1957) is the small fictional



town of Green Town, Illinois, 1928. Sandwiched between World War I and the Great Depression/Dust Bowl years, it was indeed a time ripe for innocence, contentment and prosperity.

The book is a series of vignettes — events and occurrences in Green Town as seen through the eyes of 12-year-old

Douglas Spaulding. Douglas, an imaginative and analytical lad, mature for his age, has begun this summer with an awakening of what it feels to be truly alive.

Along the way, we meet a sundry array of relatives, neighbors and other characters: neighbor Leo Auffmann, who builds a Happiness Machine; conductor

Mr. Tridden, who thrills Douglas; his brother, Tom, and their friends with one last ride on the electric trolley on the eve of the town's new bus; Miss Fern and Miss Roberta, spinsters and fearful owners of an automobile, dubbed the "Green Machine"; and Colonel Freeleigh, war hero and adventurer whom the boys have claimed as their own personal "Time Machine."

The dandelion wine? That's the endeavor of Douglas and Tom, led by their grandfather — a summer ritual with the sole purpose of capturing the joys of this savory season in a bottle. "Dandelion wine. The words were summer on the tongue." And "Hold summer in your hand, pour summer in a glass ... change the season in your veins by raising a glass to lip and tilting summer in."

One tale that packed a punch with me was of widowed Helen Bentley and a visit from the neighborhood children. Despite Mrs. Bentley's protestations and her plethora of proof, the children are firm in their conviction that the old lady could not possibly have ever been a young girl

or even had a first name! That night, frustrated, Mrs. Bentley peruses and ponders her "paraphernalia of the years." Why indeed has she saved all these treasures? "She may have been a girl once, but was not now. Her childhood was gone and nothing could fetch it back." And then her late husband's voice in her head, "Time hypnotizes. You're not these trunks of junk and dust. You're only you, here, now — the present you." Wow.

The next day she gifts the children with a bounty of her trinkets. They're still full of doubts, but she has finally let go of the past.

"Dandelion Wine" is loosely based on Bradbury's own youth experiences in Waukegan, Illinois. "Farewell Summer" (2006) and "Something Wicked This Way Comes" (1962) — the latter was made into a 1983 movie starring Jason Robards — complete Bradbury's "Green Town" trilogy.

Those are next on my reading list.

But first, I need to get my hands on a bottle of dandelion wine.

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