

# To And From The Dust, Ray Bradbury

If you're going to grow up to be a writer you must pick your relatives very carefully.

I was lucky to be born on a block where three Bradbury families inhabited homes full of books.

In my grandparents' house on the corner of Washington and St. James in Waukegan, Illinois, there were ceiling-high cases, bricked with tomes collected by my grandfather: fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and Andersen, plus Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. These made a bright ladder to be climbed by "curiouser and curiouser" boys.

In my own home on St. James, upstairs, was my crazy Aunt Neva, called crazy because she owned a wild imagination that encompassed stagecraft, dress design, and story telling. She read me L. Frank Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and all his sequels but, most incredibly, the ghastly tarns and sinking Ushers of Edgar Allan Poe. I gulped his Amontillado and buried my soul with his Tell-Tale Heart. He dug the Pit, I swung the Pendulum.

In the third Bradbury house my Uncle Bion loaned out the stunning Martian novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs and tossed in Tarzan for good measure.

So, feverishly racing back and forth among the three houses, I was fully educated by the age of 10, stuffed full with far worlds and strange enticements.

Along the way I was spelled by magicians. The amazing Blackstone came to town when I was 7 and I saw how he came alive onstage and thought, God, I want to grow like that! and ran up to help him vanish an elephant. To this day I don't know where that elephant went. One

moment it was there, the next—abracadabra—with a wave of the wand it was gone!

In 1929 Buck Rogers came into the world and on that day in October a single panel of the Buck Rogers comic strip hurled me into the future. I never came back.

It was only natural when I was 12 that I decided to become a writer and laid out a huge roll of butcher paper to begin scribbling an endless tale that scrolled right on up to Now, never guessing that the butcher paper would run forever.

So there you have an amalgam of the influences that caused me to write *From the Dust Returned*—my beloved family, books, magic, a superhero, and the transporting power of words.

And then there is Halloween. Capital to my life was, as I have said many times, my crazed Aunt Neva. Crazed, that is, with Halloween. The day before All Hallows my brother and I jumped into her Tin Lizzie and she motored us through farm country seeking hidden pumpkins and corn shucks to bring back to redecorate my grandparents' house, which was much like the house in *From the Dust Returned*. We placed the oaken leaves from the dining room table on the stairs so if you wanted to go up it was a slippery ascent, but going down, you slid.

On Halloween itself Aunt Neva declared our house a Halloween House. Pumpkins were carved, candles were lit, costumes were donned, and the "haunting" began. My aunt stashed me in the attic, dressed as a witch, where I played my violin poorly and frightened no one. So Halloween became the supreme holiday of all holidays; better than the Fourth of July and far superior to Christmas because you gave yourself gifts of weather and became something other than yourself; these things were lacking in December.

Along the way I realized I could fulfill my twin desires to become a magician and a writer. After all, what is a writer if not a magician of words? My first stories appeared in *Weird Tales*. I had discovered in my

imagination a vein of strange tales of men who found skeletons in their bodies, pale metaphors of death and destruction.

Somewhere in my middle 20s I wrote a piece of *From the Dust Returned*, a story called "Homecoming," and mailed it to *Weird Tales* who promptly rejected it, saying it wasn't "traditional" enough. They wanted ghosts like those that inhabited the stories of Edgar Allan Poe or *A Christmas Carol*.

Refusing to be refused, on a hunch I sent my story to *Mademoiselle* magazine. They didn't know what to do with it either and kept it for months. In frustration I inquired what was going on and they wired back, "We've been trying to figure ways to change your story to fit our magazine. Instead, we'll change the magazine!"

So they published a special Halloween edition of *Mademoiselle* in October 1946, complete with an illustration by Charles Addams (which is the illustration seen again after all these years, on the cover of *From the Dust Returned*).

In New York shortly thereafter, I met Mr. Addams and we planned a book; I would write and he would illustrate. He had just begun his career with what became his vivid *Addams Family* when I arrived with my *Family and my House*. We approached several publishers, had a few nibbles, years passed, Charles Addams went his way, I went mine.

From 1946 on I wrote more stories about my *Family and my House* but all the while, unknowingly, I was writing about my peculiar Aunt Neva, my Uncle Bion, and especially my Uncle Einar, the joy of my life. He was my loud, boisterous, drinking Swedish uncle who burst into our home with a great cry and left with a shout. Loving him, I fixed green wings to his shoulders and flew him through the night sky to seize and toss me into the clouds.

So, slowly, through 55 years *From the Dust Returned* evolved. Finally, two years ago, Jennifer Brehl with *Morrow Avon Books* insisted that I buckle down and finish the book; my 80th birthday was on the horizon.

Thanks to her I built more wings and caused more leaves to fall, more storm clouds to accumulate, and Houses to be raised and finished. There were voices that cried to be heard, echoes that were meant to reverberate.

My 80th birthday has passed, and I'm now looking forward to my 81st. But when I peer closely into the mirror of From the Dust Returned I see myself in Timothy, the foundling child who is taken in by the strange and wonderful Elliott Family. Of course, I will always be a child at heart; I know that is the only way to live life. How can one truly appreciate all that the world has to share if not through the unmisted eyes of a youngster?

Finally, in From the Dust Returned, all my relatives are reborn, especially my Aunt Neva who was not mad after all but who guided me through life as a real and special mother. If this book must have another special dedication it should be: To a not-so-crazy aunt, with much love.

The End