

A RAY BRADBURY TRIBUTE

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RAY BRADBURY'S VENICE

by Delores Hanney

Those were the days when the Venice pier was falling apart and dying in the sea... Death is a Lonely Business

Ray Bradbury is, of course, most revered for his ingenious fiction of the speculative sort; some of it – most notably *The Martian Chronicles* – was created while he was a resident of Venice between 1941 and 1950. Thirty-five years after de-



camping, Bradbury transmuted his Venice sojourn into usable history, reclaiming its 1940s milieu as a backdrop for *Death is a Lonely Business*, in which memory is overlaid by mystery.

It was written in homage to writers of the hardboiled school: Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James Cain and Ross Macdon-

ald. But it unfolds as languorously, surrealistically, sinuously, as sea kelp vines swaying in the tide and with the goose-pimpling gothic tilt of Edgar Allen Poe.

As a midnight trolley rattles through the rain towards the sea an odiferous but unseen man creeps up behind the tale's teller, the only other occupant of the car, to whisper -- chillingly -- of death. Less than an hour later the narrator discovers a body floating within an old circus cage submerged in the scummy waters of a Venice canal and he's convinced the two events are connected. In the company of a short, curmudgeony plainclothes detective the sleuthing duly commences.

I typically mow through mystery fiction like a dragon devouring a little covey of hapless peasants. *Death is a Lonely Business* wouldn't allow that. Some of Bradbury's tasty paragraphs I read and read again and again – out loud – to feel his words in my mouth and to revel in the poetry of their sound. His metaphor-charged prose paints oil pumps as pterodactyls, the wood of the dismembered roller coaster as dinosaur bones and he seasons his phrasing with such deliciously pumped up descriptions as that of ideas that “seethed like maggots on a hotplate.”

Oddballs and eccentrics swim up from the pages like mermaids and sea serpents and slimy bottom feeders to carry the reader along the strange twists and turns of the narrator's quest. In the guise of Bradbury's own younger self, the storyteller -- by contrast -- is an innocent, slurping up the peculiar like a hungry aardvark.

My favorite of his motley collection of misfits is Fannie Florianna, a tenderhearted, tenement dwelling past opera

diva of hippoesque proportions. She snarfs mayonnaise straight from the jar with a large spoon and keeps a piano box stashed in the alley. “The day I die,” she instructs, “bring the piano box up, tuck me in, hoist me down.”

Some of the characters and Venice return twice for encores: *A Graveyard for Lunatics* was published in 1990 and *Let's All Kill Constance* in 2003. The trilogy's a demonstration of Ray Bradbury's continuing fondness for this place he once called home, during one of the more inelegant manifestations of its existence.

Though disreputable, to be sure, and blatantly festooned with murders in his fictional versions, Bradbury holds Venice in those times gone by as insouciantly quirky rather than sordid. Some of the book's most bizarre images – like the circus wagons and cages mired in the muck and polluted water of a canal, or the Arabesque mansion on the sand or the false eyeballs displayed upon pedestals in a storefront window – gurgled up from the shabby phantasmagoria that was actually the Venice gestalt in the 1940s. It's a history. Sort of.

The cinema on the pier where the moviegoer could feel the waves roll in and out below as a love story unfolded on the screen was there too. So were the dimly lit trolleys clattering to the sea at midnight, the barbershop fitted with a piano, the faded handmade sign offering “Carnaries for Sale.”

This is the place Ray Bradbury has loved from those many decades-ago days when, at noon, he would take time out from his typing to run 100 yards to the surf and jump in for a refreshing swim. This is the place where he first brought his young wife Maggie to live. This is the place that still holds his heart, giving rise to a steadfast support of the Venice Historical Society: in its use of his name on our projects and promotions, in the annual presentations he makes for our meetings and his current leadership in kicking off the restoration fund for the Windward Avenue Colonnades.

For the fabulous tales and the unflinching fidelity: thanks to you, Ray Bradbury.

