Film

Jonathan R. Eller
RAY BRADBURY UNBOUND
(US $34.95).
978 0 252 03869 3

This sequel to Becoming Bradbury opens in 1953, and offers an in-depth analysis of Ray Bradbury’s literary career in its middle decades. It was a time when he experimented with adaptations for the screen, building on his success with Universal’s It Came From Outer Space by working with stalwarts such as John Huston and Alfred Hitchcock, and was increasingly in demand as a public speaker and essayist.

Jonathan R. Eller is quick to bestow praise when warranted, while remaining alert to his subject’s shortcomings. One chapter details Bradbury’s time in Dublin working on the screenplay of Moby-Dick – it shows how Bradbury’s adaptation of the novel “worked its way into film culture as if it were authentic Melville”. Yet his relationship with the capricious Huston shows the challenges facing scriptwriters in Hollywood. In the spring of 1955, Bradbury was notified by Warner Brothers and the Writers Guild of America (West) that Huston would be credited as co-author of the Moby-Dick screenplay. He appealed, and was initially successful – until Huston had the case re-opened, and in January 1956 the director’s input and rewrites (which Bradbury had always acknowledged) were again credited. Bradbury later defined the distinction between authorship and influence in a series of UCLA interviews: “The function of a producer is to give advice, to buck up one’s spirits, to be a teacher actually. If any man should know this, John should, because he was taught by other people, and he’s passing on the knowledge of film making. Most directors have enough sense to realise this and don’t go out for credit”.

This is a fine biography of a fascinating man, and Eller conveys well the cultural and literary forces shaping Bradbury’s later career: how Bernard Berenson’s tutelage “refined his ability to distinguish the enduring from the ephemeral”; and how his entanglement with Hollywood “greatly diminished his focus as a storyteller”, even as the 1950s and 60s were a superficially successful time in Bradbury’s career.

Paula Niclomhair