



From the Dust Returned

By Ray Bradbury
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Summary

One of Ray Bradbury's most precious childhood memories is of Halloweens spent at his grandparents' home with his beloved Aunt Neva, only ten years older than he. It was she who instilled in him his lifelong love of this most magical of holidays. Many of the characters from that long ago time have been given a life - and after-life - of their own, in Bradbury's eagerly anticipated new book *From the Dust Returned*. The story is set in the family home in an area of Illinois that Bradbury refers to as the "October Country." Bradbury's descriptions of the house - with its multitude of rooms and ninety-nine or one hundred chimneys - conjure an image of the ultimate haunted mansion. The main residents are Father, who must sleep during daylight hours; Mother, who doesn't sleep at all; A Thousand Times Great Grandmère, whose "life" spans more than four thousand years back to ancient Egypt; daughter Cecy, who sleeps day and night in order to dream-travel her way into all manner of living beings; and an adopted son, Timothy, who is clearly not like the others. The family anticipates a "Homecoming," the visitation of dozens of aunts, uncles and cousins in their various forms. There's Uncle Einar, larger than life with his huge green wings; the four cousins, all in love with and in need of Cecy; John the Unjust, who proves to be the family's undoing; and a host of other unforgettable characters. The family

must decide who they are, why they exist, and what they represent. Ultimately, they heed Great Grandmère's prophetic warnings, and disperse, scattering to the winds in order to survive before they are set upon by a mob of fearful townspeople. Richly allegorical, *From the Dust Returned* explores family relationships and universal, time-tested themes of love, belonging, sense of place, and the meaning of life and death. **Topics for Discussion**

1. With a family "history" that spans more than 4,000 years, the passage of time has a far different meaning to Elliott family members than it might have for us. How much time might have passed from the beginning of the story, when Cecy goes off in search of love, to Tom's return at the end? What do you think Bradbury is saying about our relationship to time and space?
2. Cecy declares, "If I can't be in love ... because I'm odd, then I'll be in love through someone else." [p.22] Discuss this line of thinking and what the author might be saying about vicarious experience in contemporary society.
3. Her parents warn that Cecy might be "diminished" should she marry "a mere earth-bound creature," yet she appears to be ready to do so. [p. 32] If you had Cecy's ability to experience the world through others' eyes, would you consider it a gift or a liability? Explain.
4. Upon discovering the abandoned baby, Father insists, "He is not like us." Mother replies, "No, but still." Make an argument for both sides: Should the Family keep the baby or not? Had the Dark Lady not intervened, who do you think would have prevailed? Why?
5. Cecy "visits" a lonely farmer's wife by a salt sea, near the mud pots [p. 60] and tells Timothy that she intends to stay "until I've listened and looked and felt enough to change her life." Yet, as she departs, now in the form of a bird, she sees the woman sinking in a pool of mud - indeed a life-changing event. Under what circumstances can death be an acceptable alternative to life? Was this scene one such circumstance?
6. Discuss the story of the ghostly passenger on the Orient Express. Do you agree with his characterization of Americans as doubters, the French as cynics, and the English as the only believers? [pp. 95-96] Why would he have felt equally assaulted by atheists as well as true believers? "Poisonous talk and delirious chatter" cause the passenger to wilt. How does modern technology contribute to our own deterioration?
7. Nostrum Paracelsus Crook insists that the Family define themselves for the first time [p. 111], yet their process is interrupted by the ghostly passenger seeking refuge, who says, "Ask not for whom the funeral bell tolls . . ." Discuss the Family's decision in the context of meeting individual personal needs versus an obligation to assist others.
8. Father provides Timothy a history of "the rising tide of disbelief," saying, "So Christians and Muslims confront a world torn by many wars to finalize yet a larger." He then poses the question, "Does the unholy or holy win?" [p. 117] Discuss your reaction to Father's explanation, especially in light of recent world events. Knowing that some of the stories in this book were originally written more than fifty years ago, when do you suppose that Bradbury wrote this particular passage?
9. In Chapter 15, Uncle Einar resigns himself to marriage, once he can no longer travel in the manner to which he has become accustomed. He changes his diet and sleeping habits; his wife, in turn, makes him more comfortable. Do you believe that the secret to a successful marriage is this kind of give-and-take? Should spouses change to meet the needs of each other?
10. From Angelina Marguerite, Timothy learns the lesson, "Make haste to live." [Chapter 18] If you found yourself growing ever younger, as did Angelina, would you be as likely to "make haste to live" as you might if the reverse were true, and you were rapidly aging? Instead of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," could you embrace a philosophy of "angels and flowers?"
11. Great Grandmère has been both ignored and forgotten by "a Family eager for survival and forgetful of unremembered deaths' leftovers." [p. 174] Why is a family's history important? What can we do to preserve and record ours?
12. Ray Bradbury once said of his stories that they are warnings, not predictions. "If they were predictions I wouldn't do them, because then I'd be part of a doom-ridden psychology. Every time I name the problem, I try to give the solution." Spend some time talking about the problems Bradbury has identified in *From the Dust Returned*, and the solutions he presents as well.

About the Author: Ray Bradbury first wrote about the Elliott family more than fifty years ago in "Homecoming," a short story that appeared in the October 1946 issue of *Mademoiselle* magazine. The story was illustrated by Charles Addams, creator of "The Addams Family," and Addams and Bradbury hoped to one day collaborate on an Elliott family book. Though his stories are closer to fantasy than science fiction - and closer to reality than fantasy - Bradbury is regarded as a giant of science fiction today. Among his many books are *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*, *Dandelion Wine*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *The October Country*, and *Fahrenheit 451*. He is the winner of numerous awards for his books and screenplays, and was Idea Consultant for the United States Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair. He has also worked as a consultant on city engineering and rapid transit, and helped design several malls in California, where he currently resides. In November 2000, Bradbury was awarded the National Book Foundation's 2000 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. He lives with his wife, Marguerite, in Los Angeles.