

451°



BURN

a short story

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This is an experiment.
This is an assignment.
This is a prerequisite.

The world is burning.
A disaster developed over generations of neglect and abuse.
A ruin left in chicken bone dust and cigarette ash.
A wasteland of monoculture dumpster fires.

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The cursor blinked counting the seconds. I checked the time.
“Dammit,” I closed my laptop. I pushed down the footrest back
into my blue recliner.

“Mitchell,” I called from the living room, “would you please stop
playing the video game and read.”

I waited. There was no response.

“Mitchell.” I repeated with more force. “You need to stop playing that video game and read.”

I waited. Still, there was no response.

“Mitchell!” I yelled.

“What?!” He screamed back.

“Get off that video game and read!”

“I’m *not on a video game*. I’m watching a show.”

The technicality afforded him an additional thirty-seconds as I made my way up the stairs and down the hallway to his bedroom threshold.

“Mitchell Benjamin.” I took a deep breath to push oxygen to my frontal lobe. My calm convictions returned as my logic centers reclaimed my behavior from my brain stem. “Listen, you have been on that for over an hour. You need to read for a bit.”

“Compromise?” He asked without peeling his eyes from the screen.

“I’m listening.” I responded, reminded of teaching him the life lesson of finding common ground. The screen kept talking. “Pause that please and look at me.” He pressed pause, but kept glancing between me and the terrible waste produced from the unboxing video, “Mitchell.”

“Yes!” He looked at me with guilty wide eyes. “Ten minutes, then I’ll read six chapters.”

“Seven minutes, and seven chapters.”

“*Okay*,” he reluctantly agreed as he immediately pressed play.

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Earth faces flooding and drought, hurricanes and blizzards: a climate in chaotic crisis without redemption. Society faces systematic oppression, entrenched prejudice, income inequality and the list never ends.

The generations before us, charged us with cleaning up messes. Cleaning up a mess they made raising us. Burdened with our own fermented disposable diapers. Shouldered with TV dinners encrusted with microwave mac and cheese. Decisions convenience made for us are now ones we are responsible for rescuing the future from.

Yesterday, their grandparents created the spoiled scar we wear. Today, we raise them, the next generation, without any cheating. Tomorrow, they will hate us for our attempts to stop the cycle.

Being judged for our children on devices. Being judged for being helicopters. Being judged because they should play outside unsupervised with sticks and rocks, while they inherit a planet that runs on electricity and social media.

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“Mitchell.” I called from my recliner, “Seven minutes are up, actually it has been eleven, so it is time.”

There was no response.

“Mitchell!” I yelled.

“Okay! *Okay!*” He yelled back. “You don’t *have* to yell.”

“Read.” I stated. “What part are you on?”

“I just finished *The Hearth and the Salamander*. So I’m starting...” I heard him flipping pages even downstairs, “...The See.. Sia.. *The Sieve and the Sand?*”

“That’s good,” I confirmed, “sound it out.”

Twelve-years-old and he had already started *Fahrenheit 451*. The only repercussion that far was the night terror about the house being set on fire by firemen, since we had so many books in the house. He had started making lists about what to take if he needed to escape in the dead of night from a blaze.

“So... five chapters?” He attempted to alter the agreement in the last seconds.

“No,” I held strong, “We agreed on seven.”

“Fine.”

The house was silent again. I started writing again.

... | ... | ... |

This is fictional.

This is intentional.

This is additional.

The world is burning.

An emergency of filibustered collaborations and solipsism.
A wad of pharmaceutical bandaids and candy bar wrappers.
An amalgamation of used surgical gloves and ketchup packets.

Landfill mountains of garbage with single-use electronics that dig into the earth of rancid leftovers like roots. Ocean islands of trash clinging to the currents with abandoned fishing nets and gas station styrofoam cups. Microplastic beaches littered with oil soaked whale carcasses and aluminum beer cans.

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“Dad!” Mitchell called, “I’m hungry.”

I refuse to respond. No request. Just an announcement of a belly he finally noticed was empty because his cereal went soggy while he had his face in a device.

“Can I have a snack?”

Two minutes. Two minutes in.

“Dad!!” He yelled. “I need something to eat.”

“How far are you?”

“Ugh!” He groaned. “Five.”

“Five pages? Five sentences?”

“Five words,” he whispered but I still caught it.

“What?”

“FIVE WORDS! Gawd!”

“Compromise?” I offered.

“YES!”

“I will get you a breakfast bar after five pages,” I suggested, already swallowing the irony of another wrapper in the trash bag.

“Fine.”

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This is inspired

This is acquired.

This is required.

The world is burning.

A trash compactor of packing peanuts and expired canned meat.

A gutter full of nuclear waste and orange prescription tubes.

A sewer clog of crystalized tampons and clusters of condoms.

We were absent for the emotional development of our children.

From the factory worker on third-shift building commercial airplanes to the electrical line repairer that braves thunderstorms to restore coal produced power.

We argued with other adults about how to increase efficiency and profits for a better future for the company and our families. From the project manager organizing the team of engineers that design vending machine coin changers to the accountant calculating the payroll checks for an asphalt company.

We stared at screens working to advocate for the world to be a better place by writing scientific research reports and inspirational novels. From the scholar that studies the psychological effects of fiction on behavior to the starving, delusional author composing a novel to save the world from... |

... | ... | ... |

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This is the moment you realize that you simultaneously hate and respect your own parents.

... | ... | ... |

Set the books on the fire. Watch them burn.
 Throw the living libraries on the fire. Watch them burn.
 Throw the world on the flaming pile of shit. Watch it all burn.

These are the living libraries reheating.
 These are the book club meetings.
 These are additional... required... readings.

Additional Required Readings.
 That is a great title for this list.

Imagine if we asked people to embody *literature* like living libraries. Imagine if we assigned students novels to *integrate* into their lives. Imagine if we raised our children to *experiment* with fiction and they explored the *what if* of imagination as reality.

Literature Integration Experiments.
 That is a great name for this project.

... |

“Mitchell,” I called upstairs, “Instead of a bar, let’s have a father-son brunch. I’ll make waffles.”

I shut down my computer.
I finally put away my screen.

I prepared myself:

To step aside.
To be hated.
To give him something to burn.

... |



MODERN GODS

Without freethinkers.

Without major changes to the way we educate ourselves.

Without empathy.

Civilization, as we know it, is doomed.

But laughing at the absurdity and darkness,
we gain perspective.

Because it is only when we suffer who we are
that we will suffer for whom others want to be.

Because if we can't grasp to be pulled from the mire soon,
we'll be irreversibly buried in our own egoism.

Modern Gods offers artistic endeavors and products which
compel uncomfortable reflection and
with others, lively, if heated, debate.

As a fictional universe, Modern Gods combines
novels, songs, artwork, and videos to create one big story.

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