



HarperCollins e-books



# October Country

**Ray Bradbury**

# THE OCTOBER COUNTRY

**RAY BRADBURY**

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers*

# ***Dedication***

*For who else but  
August Derleth*

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# Homesteading the October Country

## *An Introduction*

**W**ell, now, how do you do that—homestead an autumn landscape that won't stand still, all whispers, shadows, and dousing rains?

It all began the day I was born. Oh my god, I can hear you say, here comes the flim-flam. No, no, I say, here comes a consequential truth: *I remember being born.*

Can't be done, you counter. Never happened.

Did, is my response.

I found out many, many years later the reason for my remembrance: I was a ten-month baby. Which means what? That snuggled away for an extra twenty-eight or thirty days I had a serene opportunity to develop my sight, hearing, and taste. I came forth wide-eyed, aware of everything I saw and felt. Especially the dreadful shock of being propelled out into a cooler environment, leaving my old home forever, to be surrounded by strangers.

All because I had lingered for that extra month and sharpened my senses.

You must admit that gave me an advantage few other humans have had, to emerge with my retina in full register to recall from Instant One a lifetime of metaphors, large and small.

From that moment on I can recollect my life.

When I was three my mother, a maniac for silent movies, toted me to the cinema to see *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with Lon Chaney riding the bells and raining hot liquid lead on the villains below the church.

I did not encounter the Hunchback again until I was seventeen, when some unholy friends took me to a theatre in Hollywood for a late-on-in-life review. Before we entered I told my friends I remembered the entire film, last seen when I was three. They snorted and laughed. I described the most important scenes. We then went in and there were all the scenes I had described.

*The Phantom of the Opera*. Same experience. 1925. Imbedded in the dark place at the back of my head.

*The Lost World*. Same year. The dinosaurs lingered into my thirties when I wrote them down and did a film with the fabulous animator of dinosaurs, Ray Harryhausen, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*.

Add them all up, being born aware, climbing Notre Dame with the Hunchback, shadowing the Opera with the Phantom, falling off prehistoric cliffs with brontosaurus, and you arrive at the age of twelve to begin writing.

Along the way you illustrate skeletons for your school because skeletons are wondrous ramshackle items that birth themselves when the humans they wore go away.

Along the way you discover you are alive—age twelve. Discover you can die—age fourteen. Plus the funerals of your grandfather and sister and a few friends, waking you up midnight.

And THE OCTOBER COUNTRY is inevitable.

When I finished my first short story in the seventh grade I knew I was on the right path to immortality. Or the sort of immortality that counts, being remembered here and there in your time while alive, existing a few years after your death beyond all that.

From the age of twelve I knew I was in a life and death match, winning every time I finished a new story, threatened with extinction on those days I did not write. The only answer, then, was: write. I have written every day of my life since my twelfth year. Death has not caught me yet. He will, eventually, of course, but for the time being the sound of my IBM Wheelwriter Number Ten electric typewriter puts him off his feed.

There you have the noon at midnight platform for a writing life. Once established hiding behind the towering bastion of my IBM machine, I hurled fireballs at the Dark Presence, daring him to try again.

The contest has resulted in all that you will read here. “The Small Assassin” is, of course, me. “The Homecoming” family is my Waukegan hometown family, surrounding me in my youth, prolonging themselves into shadows and haunts when I reached maturity. “Skeleton” resulted from my discovering the bones within my flesh, plus seeing the pale skull ghost of myself in an X-ray film.

“Uncle Einar” is a love story. I so loved my favorite loud, brash Swedish uncle that I named and wrote a story about him, adding wings.

“The Next in Line” recites my terror of being trapped in Mexico, in a corridor of mummies I hope never to see again.

“The Jar” was a display I witnessed at a seaside carnival when I was fourteen. A whole series of jars, in which mysterious objects floated, haunted me for years until I wrote about them.

Finally, on the threshold of puberty, “Mr. Electrico,” the carnival magician, summoned me away from graveyards and funerals, touched me with the St. Elmo’s fire sword and shouted sound advice: “Live forever!”

I did just that.

And here I am.

And here *it* is.

THE OCTOBER COUNTRY.

I bid you welcome.

RAY BRADBURY  
Los Angeles, California  
January 1999

## October Country

. . . that country where it is always turning late in the year. That country where the hills are fog and the rivers are mist; where noons go quickly, dusks and twilights linger, and mid-nights stay. That country composed in the main of cellars, sub-cellars, coal-bins, closets, attics, and pantries faced away from the sun. That country whose people are autumn people, thinking only autumn thoughts. Whose people passing at night on the empty walks sound like rain. . . .

## THE DWARF



**A**imee watched the sky, quietly.

Tonight was one of those motionless hot summer nights. The concrete pier empty, the strung red, white, yellow bulbs burning like insects in the air

above the wooden emptiness. The managers of the various carnival pitches stood, like melting wax dummies, eyes staring blindly, not talking, all down the line.

Two customers had passed through an hour before. Those two lonely people were now in the roller coaster, screaming murderously as it plummeted down the blazing night, around one emptiness after another.

Aimee moved slowly across the strand, a few worn wooden hoopla rings sticking to her wet hands. She stopped behind the ticket booth that fronted the MIRROR MAZE. She saw herself grossly misrepresented in three rippled mirrors outside the Maze. A thousand tired replicas of herself dissolved in the corridor beyond, hot images among so much clear coolness.

She stepped inside the ticket booth and stood looking a long while at Ralph Banghart's thin neck. He clenched an unlit cigar between his long uneven yellow teeth as he laid out a battered game of solitaire on the ticket shelf.

When the roller coaster wailed and fell in its terrible avalanche again, she was reminded to speak.

"What kind of people go up in roller coasters?"

Ralph Banghart worked his cigar a full thirty seconds. "People wanna die. That rollie coaster's the handiest thing to dying there is." He sat listening to the faint sound of rifle shots from the shooting gallery. "This whole damn carny business's crazy. For instance, that dwarf. You seen him? Every night, pays his dime, runs in the Mirror Maze all the way back through to Screwy Louie's Room. You should see this little runt head back there. My God!"

"Oh, yes," said Aimee, remembering. "I always wonder what it's like to be a dwarf. I always feel sorry when I see him."

"I could play him like an accordion."

"Don't say that!"

"My Lord." Ralph patted her thigh with a free hand. "The way you carry on about guys you never even met." He shook his head and chuckled. "Him and his secret. Only he don't know I know, see? Boy howdy!"

"It's a hot night." She twitched the large wooden hoops nervously on her damp fingers.

"Don't change the subject. He'll be here, rain or shine."

Aimee shifted her weight.