

A canticle for
leibowitz: straight
outta the (gernsback)
ghetto



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

After the end of World War II, Americans lived under the fear of nuclear war. The government built up huge arsenals of nuclear bombs, and used propaganda to assuage the American people's fear. The best known example of that is the Duck and Cover propaganda film which tells Americans that a picnic blanket could protect them from a nuclear bomb (USA). To reflect these trends, fiction authors wrote plenty of novels hypothesizing what would happen in the case of nuclear apocalypse (Brians). Some of these, like Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon*, simply described the effects that a nuclear war on the United States might have (Frank). Similarly, Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* details The Bomb's impact after mankind's advanced civilization has been destroyed. Since its publication in 1960 during the height of the Cold War, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* has been highly regarded not just by the rather geeky science fiction community (often called the "Gernsback Ghetto") but also by the broader literary community because Miller's post-apocalyptic world strongly resonates with literary readers who identify with the political and social message of the novel, thereby transcending the Gernsback Ghetto.

As one might expect, writers of literature often tend to write about the topics of their time since contemporary events provide inspiration and naturally resonate with their audiences. Science fiction, which is very forward looking, generally does not follow that trend since it tells unrealistic stories based on improbable settings. Stereotypically, it involves dragging readers to the future to deal with fantastical aluminum future. *Canticle*, on the other hand, draws on the real fear of nuclear war which Americans felt in the 1950s, to project a post-apocalyptic world. Nuclear war and its fallout were Americans'

worst nightmare and the book presents that nightmare as alternative history fiction blended with science fiction. It takes a topic that readers are familiar with (the enmity and deadlock between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War) and hypothesizes what might happen if relations between the two enemies turn even more sour and nuclear war breaks out.

Canticle's plot touches on the cycle of history already familiar to readers. The first part starts in the dark ages of the future, 600 years after the 20th century and the disastrous nuclear war. The second part fast forwards 600 years to a Renaissance and shows a society rebuilding with all of the trappings. It ends another 600 years forward with two superpowers that ultimately destroy each other via nuclear war. Readers can recognize that this is the history of Europe's civilization when it moved from the Dark Ages to the Renaissance and then to the brink of nuclear destruction again.

Another way Miller touches on Americans' fear is by creating a world that is familiar to Americans. The book is set in the future but it is a world Americans are familiar with. It cleverly reminds readers of this context at nearly every opportunity. For example, early in the book, Brother Francis finds Leibowitz's task list. One of the tasks was "Remember – pick up Form 1040, Uncle Revenue", a nod to the IRS form that most Americans fill out (Miller 26). By sprinkling these small references from contemporary American society throughout the text, Miller makes sure that the real life references of this novel are constantly on display for the reader. This familiarity is comforting to the reader but also makes them even more afraid of American society being devastated by nuclear weapons. This relatability

makes it easier to empathize with the characters, boosting its popularity in the wider literary community.

Later in the story, Miller brings back the motif of two warring powers that the readers of the book are well familiar with. He has the Asian Coalition and the Atlantic Confederacy locked in a familiar nuclear standoff, 1700 years into the future. The public is fearful and that is reflected in the Lady Reporter's interviews with the Defense Minister. The Lady Reporter asks questions to find out if the War Ministry (which is actually called the Defense Ministry but it's telling that the reporter says "War Ministry") is worried and at a certain point in the interview, completely loses it: "His Supremacy is an eleven-year-old boy, and to call it his government is not only archaic, but a highly dishonorable — even cheap! — attempt to shift the responsibility for a full denial from your own —" reflecting the deep fear that she had of a war (Miller 263). That same fear was mirrored in the people. Later, after the beginning of the nuclear war, Zerchi gives a fearful rant about the irresponsibility of both sides in allowing the war to pass. That feeling was very familiar to Americans who lived through the Cold War. Canticle's readers would have agreed that nuclear war would be the height of irresponsibility as the people lived in a constant state of worry and fear lest the government would violate the ground rules of nuclear war and destroy each other. The lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were fresh on readers' minds in 1960 when Canticle was published and are remembered are remembered even today.

Canticle also seeks to remind readers of other real life historical events. In the second part of the book, as part of a political dispute, Hannegan cuts ties <https://assignbuster.com/a-canticle-for-leibowitz-straight-outta-the-germsback-ghetto/>

with the papacy. This further serves to make the book relatable by tying to English and French European history; several times monarchs European monarchs quarrelled with the papacy over political, economic and social and economic matters. In his statement cutting ties with the Papacy, Hannegan notes that “[w]e [Texarkanan clergy], the only legitimate ruler over the Church in this realm” (Miller 227). This is the exact same tactic that the English Parliament used when it declared Henry VIII the head of the Church of England: “ the king’s Majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the supreme head of the Church of England” (United). This allusion to historical events allowed Canticle to enter the literary canon.. History resonates with the public (and especially with the literary community) which provides another way for Canticle to gain legitimacy in mainstream literature outside of the Gernsback Ghetto.

Science fiction is usually scorned by literary aficionados and usually excluded from the canon. However, A Canticle for Leibowitz transcends that trend by forging a strong connection with real life events that can naturally attract people who might usually belittle Canticle as being “ just” science fiction. This allowed it to transcend the “ Gernsback Ghetto” to become a piece of mainstream literature.