A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959): One of the science fiction works of the era depicting the consequences of nuclear war

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Walter M. Miller Jr.'s science fiction novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, first published in 1959, describes the effects of a nuclear war, and, to a certain extent, sets out the conditions that might lead up to such a catastrophic conflict. Over the decades, the book has sold millions of copies and, despite shortcomings, deserves to be read again today because of the threat of nuclear devastation arising from the immense crisis of the global capitalist system.

Since the United States and NATO provoked the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin into its disastrous invasion of Ukraine in February, with each new infusion of American and European weaponry and each new Russian military setback, the possibility of an exchange with weapons that could destroy humanity has come closer than it has been at any time in the last 60 years. In September, the US president felt compelled to warn a meeting of American billionaires, "We have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962."

In its analysis of the situation, the *World Socialist Web Site* has called for the building of an international socialist anti-war movement based on the working class to stop this threat. In a major anti-war statement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality explained: "We recognize that the defeat of imperialism depends upon the emergence of the working class, armed with a socialist program, as the leading and decisive revolutionary force in the fight against the world capitalist system."

Such a development depends not only on a great political, but also an intellectual-cultural movement in the working class and among artists themselves. But in recent years, by and large, novelists, filmmakers, visual artists, and musicians have had little to say about the threat of nuclear war. One of the notable exceptions has been Pink Floyd founder Roger Waters, whose recent concert tour and multimedia installation *This Is Not a Drill* directly raised the specter of nuclear war in the NATO-US-Russian conflict in Ukraine.

While a post-apocalyptic fiction and film genre still exists, its themes have largely become disconnected, especially since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, from the realistic or plausible portrayal of nuclear war and the circumstances that could produce the latter.

Margaret Atwood's more recent efforts in *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and its sequels portray a dystopia caused by genetic engineering gone awry. Jim Crace's 2007 novel *The Pesthouse* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) describe worlds destroyed by pandemic, not war—an entirely legitimate theme, as the last three years have shown, but still revealing what does *not* concern writers. Other works that do present nuclear war as the cause of disastrous circumstances, such as Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) and the film *The Book of Eli* (Gary Whitta, 2010), are rare and generally tell us very little about what might bring about such a calamity.

Ignorance or silence in regard to the dangers of nuclear war on the part of artists, however, was not always the case. Far from it. Throughout the Cold War, artists and writers struggled with the implications of nuclear war. In science fiction, a whole sub-genre of post-apocalyptic novels, short stories and films arose. Not only did these works describe the possible effects on society of this kind of war, they also considered, at least tentatively, the question of how such a war could start in a society, contemporary or otherwise.

Judith Merril's *Shadow on the Hearth* (1950), Philip Wylie's *Tomorrow!* (1954), John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*(1955), Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959) and Algis Budrys's *Some Will Not Die* (1961) all reflect a deep concern that those in charge of the world might destroy it. Later works expressed similar concerns, including Harlan Ellison's story, "A Boy and His Dog" (1969), as well as its 1975 film adaptation (L.Q. Jones), along with other films and television productions such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959, although not science fiction), *The Day After* (Nicholas Meyer, 1983), *Threads* (Mick Jackson, 1984) and *When the Wind Blows* (Jimmy Murakami, 1986). These are artistic efforts worth revisiting, or approaching for the first time.

Although apocalyptic tales and myths have a lengthy history, the literature treating nuclear annihilation, for obvious reasons, was a product of a specific historical epoch: the "Cold War" conflict between the USSR and the US, with its nuclear arms race, which lasted roughly from 1949 to 1991. Almost inevitably, the literature in the US was conditioned—and marred— by the political character of the period out of which it emerged.

Official, state-sponsored anti-Communism infected or tainted much of American intellectual life, while the international labor movement was dominated by bureaucracy: trade union, social democratic and Stalinist. The literature of the time did raise questions about freedom of expression, political repression, conformity and authoritarianism (especially in the light of Nazism and the Holocaust), but it was unable or unwilling to examine the most profound causes of war in the 20th century—the existence of the profit system with its division of the world into competing nation-states—and the reactionary political and social forces that threatened to hurl the planet into a Third World War.

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Nevertheless, the science fiction of the postwar years was able to convey the fear that ordinary people felt about the possibility of a nuclear Armageddon.

One of the most popular and best known of these works was *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, originally published as three novellas in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* from 1955 to 1957.

The book is one of the classics of the science fiction genre. It has never been out of print, with more than 2 million copies sold to date. Miller's work won the 1961 Hugo Award for best science fiction novel. A sequel, which fell short of the original, *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*, was published posthumously in 1997.

The book's first part, *Fiat Homo* [Latin for "Let There Be Man"], is set at a monastery in the American southwest 600 years after a catastrophic nuclear exchange, which the people of that era call the Flame Deluge. A social movement against learning and knowledge, called the Great Simplification, has attempted to exterminate all trace of civilization's past. Books and documents from the past are rare. The art of printing has been lost.

Residing at the monastery are the monks of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, who devote their lives to the conservation of an archive of documents including blueprints, diagrams and even a grocery list that once belonged to Isaac Edward Leibowitz. A weapons engineer at Los Alamos, New Mexico before the fatal war, Leibowitz was martyred for his efforts to safeguard the papers.

The plot of *Fiat Homo* centers around the discovery in the desert of a new trove of Leibowitz documents by a young acolyte and the preservation of the new documents.

Set six centuries later, the second part of Miller's novel, *Fiat Lux* ["Let There Be Light"], depicts mankind's beginning to emerge from the dark ages. A second scientific revolution has commenced, which includes the reinvention of the electric light, powered via a treadmill.

The third and final part of the book, *Fiat Voluntas Tua* ["Let Thy Will Be Done"], takes place in 3781 AD. Two world superpowers reminiscent of the Soviet Union and the United States—the Asian Coalition and the Atlantic Confederacy—have been embroiled in their own "Cold War" for 50 years. As political tensions rise, the task of the Leibowitzian Order has expanded into the preservation of all knowledge.

An exchange of nuclear weapons takes place, for the second time in the novel's fictional history. Miller describes its horrifying effects, including the moral choices that doctors and monks must make in treating those with radiation poisoning:

"During the cease-fire, the abbey converted itself into a shelter for refugees fleeing the regions affected by fallout, resulting in a heated debate between the abbot and a doctor from a nearby emergency response bivouac on whether refugees affected by the fallout be euthanized."

The debate over these issues ends when a nuclear bomb goes off near the abbey. Some humans can escape in a spaceship to Alpha Centauri. The final passages of the book portray an Earth without humanity:

"A wind came across the ocean, sweeping with it a pall of fine white ash. The ash fell into the sea and into the breakers. The breakers washed dead shrimp ashore with the driftwood. Then they washed up the whiting. The shark swam out to his deepest waters and brooded in the old clean currents. He was very hungry that season."

Like much of the science fiction of this era that deals with nuclear war, Miller expresses a pessimism about humanity's inability to overcome its self-destructive tendencies when it emerges into a technological age.

Miller's strong hatred of war finds expression throughout the novel, which had its origins in personal experience. Miller played a role in the Allied bombing of the abbey at Monte Cassino in Italy in 1944. Founded in 529 by Saint Benedict of Nursia, the abbey itself was a historical monument of great value. After German occupation forces withdrew, removing the abbey's manuscripts and other priceless materials, including paintings by the Old Masters, to the Vatican, hundreds of civilians took refuge in the abbey as the Allies advanced against the Germans and their fascist allies.

On February 15, 1944, the Allied command, believing the abbey was being used as an observation post by the Germans, ordered its bombing. A fleet of aircraft dropped more than 1,400 tons of explosives, which not only reduced the monastery to rubble, but killed 230 Italian civilians. Miller was one of the airmen involved in the bombing raid.

After the USSR detonated its first atomic bomb in 1949, the subject of a possible nuclear war became a central concern for Miller. Many years later, in 1985, he edited an anthology, *Beyond Armageddon*, containing short stories about the aftermath of such a conflict, featuring fiction by Arthur C. Clarke and Ray Bradbury, among other notable figures.

The introduction to that collection was perhaps his final statement on the issue. Miller expressed his disgust with the eagerness of the Ronald Reagan administration to confront the USSR and refers several times to the then-president's infamous visit in May 1985 to the Bitburg Cemetery in Germany, where members of Hitler's Waffen SS were buried. In his introduction, Miller wrote that the anthology's stories were about an afterlife: "Survivors don't really live in such a world; they haunt it."

The introduction is typical of much of the thinking of the time: a mixture of genuine anti-war sentiment and a confused search for a solution in almost every idealist school of thought, from Catholicism to Daoism.

Miller committed suicide in 1996 at the age of 72. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* was his only completed novel, but it remains one of the finest works of fiction that raises a great issue of our time: the danger of the destruction of human society and culture through nuclear armageddon. Although Miller's conclusions were pessimistic, the work and others like it should find a new audience among those determined to stop World War III.

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