

A Canticle for Leibowitz

Walter M Miller, 1959

>> **Jon Courtenay Grimwood takes a trip to a post-apocalyptic America...**

You could say that it takes luck to publish only one novel and for that novel to sell over two million copies and influence an entire generation of readers and writers. You could say it takes brilliance. But for Walter M Miller, Jr it took guilt...

In 529AD the Italian monastery of Monte Cassino was founded by St Benedict, who gave his name to the Benedictine monks (stay with us, this really matters). In 581 the Lombards destroyed it. In 883 it was the turn of the Arabs. The next time war reduced Monte Cassino to rubble was in 1944, when it was bombed into the dirt by the Allied air force. The German forces survived by hiding in caves, but the Western world's oldest monastery, most of its art treasures and a number of its priceless manuscripts were destroyed.

One of those involved in the bombing of Monte Cassino was a young tail gunner who'd turned 22 a couple of weeks before. His name was Walter M Miller. In total, he flew 55 combat missions, and the bombing of Monte Cassino was to haunt him, quite possibly right up to the moment he shot himself through the head, just before his 73rd birthday (while working on a sequel).

In *A Canticle for Leibowitz* the monastery at Monte Cassino becomes an abbey in the southwestern United States (as was), and the bombing becomes a nuclear war that has reduced the world to rubble, although it is the rubble of a civilisation. After the *flame deluge* of nuclear war came the *simplification*: a violent backlash against all those who designed and made the weapons that destroyed society. Books were burnt and literacy vanished, intellectuals and scientists were killed. A new and voluntary dark age descended on the already ravaged Earth.

Against this back history, Miller traces the rise of a new civilisation over the course of 1,500 years, taking the world back to where we came in. It's a lot funnier than it sounds. At least, the results are, by the time we meet them.



***A Canticle for Leibowitz* is now regarded as the definitive post-bomb science fiction novel.**

The novel opens with the finding of a list left by the Blessed Saint Leibowitz, founder of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, who, before he converted to Catholicism, was a Jewish engineer working for the United States Army. The list reads: "Pound pastrami, can kraut, six bagels – bring home for Emma."

The list is found by Brother Francis Gerard of Utah, who is punished rather than rewarded by his superiors. Apparently another miracle is not what the church needs. And while the reader knows this is a shopping list, and another relic is a lottery ticket, that information is denied to the monks,

who are all that protect knowledge in a world of robbers, mutants and wild animals. So the monks look for meaning in the strange lists, and robbers mistake beautifully painted copies for the original and tatty relics for the poor copies. And all the time, Miller is really talking about us.

There's a Zen dryness to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, a sense of it being written by someone who needs to talk about what he's seen by talking about something else. The book is really three linked novellas, with the first originally published in 1955, the second in 1956 and the third in 1957, all in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. After some reworking, the three novellas were combined in 1959 to produce the book which won Miller the 1961 Hugo Award.

Written at the height of the Cold War, *Canticle* is now regarded as the definitive post-bomb SF novel, but even this is to underestimate Walter M Miller's achievement. Because this is also a book about religion, and as such, is a forerunner to Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* (1969), and Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1997), among others.

A Canticle for Leibowitz also achieved status as a breakthrough book, receiving reviews from heavyweight papers across the world, and doing much to make science fiction novels acceptable. And it did all this with humour, intelligence, anger and conviction. Without it written SF would look very different. **SFX**

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's latest novel, End of the World Blues, is available now from Gollancz (RRP £12.99).

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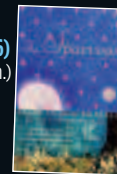
***Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman* by Walter M Miller (2000)**

Not actually a sequel, but set in the same world, it was completed after Miller's death by Terry Bisson, who is reported to have written about a fifth of the final book.



***The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell (1996)**

Jesuits in Space! (Okay, that's the glib version.) One of the few books to combine sex, Christianity and aliens, and bring a literary twist to a staple of pulp SF, the meeting of wildly different cultures.



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>> "It may end up displacing *Lord of the Rings* as my favourite book. I can't help loving a book that interweaves SF, a critique on the hubris of science and reflections on the positive contribution religion can have on society."
Org

>> "Seeing as how it was published in '59, it must have seemed worryingly prescient during the Cuban Missile Crisis..."
Midget_Yoda

>> "One of the best stories ever about faith and the human condition! If you're not moved by the ending there's something wrong with you."
johnone

>> "I was amazed at the broad range of issues that were tackled and analysed; a fascinating read, managing to be both depressing and hopeful at the same time."
bookworm192398

>> "A very thoughtful insight into human nature, in terms of how organised religion can alter the perception of something, along with posing the question, 'is the human race doomed to never learn from its mistakes?'"
ceribethlem

>> "A fine, important novel, as relevant today in its themes as it was 50-odd years ago. A classic."
Clown Asylum

>> "One of those books I really like but I'm not entirely sure why. Hard to believe it was originally published so long ago."
Doc Savage

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>> In *SFX154* we'll be taking to the skies with Anne McCaffrey's fantasy classic *Dragonflight*. Read it with us!

NEXT ISSUE: Dave Langford looks at Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*.