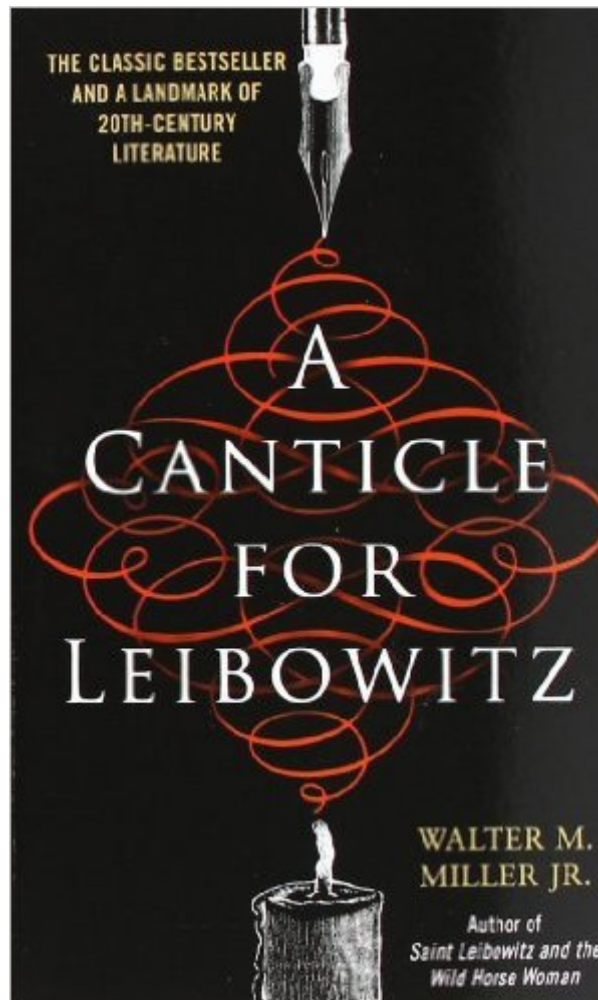


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A Canticle For Leibowitz



Synopsis

In the depths of the Utah desert, long after the Flame Deluge has scoured the earth clean, a monk of the Order of Saint Leibowitz has made a miraculous discovery: holy relics from the life of the great saint himself, including the blessed blueprint, the sacred shopping list, and the hallowed shrine of the Fallout Shelter. In a terrifying age of darkness and decay, these artifacts could be the keys to mankind's salvation. But as the mystery at the core of this groundbreaking novel unfolds, it is the search itself— for meaning, for truth, for love—that offers hope for humanity's rebirth from the ashes.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Walter Miller's only major novel is not simply a post-apocalyptic science fiction novel but also a multi-layered meditation on the conflict between knowledge and morality. Six hundred years after a nuclear holocaust, an abbey of Catholic monks survives during a new Dark Ages and preserves the little that remains of the world's scientific knowledge. The monks also seek evidence concerning the existence of Leibowitz, their alleged founder (who, the reader soon realizes, is a Jewish scientist who appears to have been part of the nuclear industrial complex of the 1960s). The second part fast-forwards another six hundred years, to the onset of a new Renaissance; a final section again skips yet another six hundred years, to the dawn of a second Space Age—complete, once again, with nuclear weapons. The only character who appears in all three sections is the Wandering Jew—borrowed from the anti-Semitic legend of a man who mocked Jesus on the way to the

crucifixion and who was condemned to a vagrant life on earth until Judgment Day. Miller resurrects this European slander and sanitizes him as a curmudgeonly hermit, a voice of reason in a desert wilderness, an observer to humankind's repeated stupidities, a friend to the monks and abbots, the biblical Lazarus, the ghost of Leibowitz (perhaps)--and even the voice of Miller himself. Throughout "Canticle," Miller's search for religious faith clashes with his respect for scientific rationalism. For Miller, Lucifer is not a fallen angel but technological discovery unencumbered by a moral compass; "Lucifer is fallen" becomes the code phrase the future Church uses to indicate the imminent threat of a second nuclear holocaust.

"A Canticle for Leibowitz" chronicles the rebuilding of "civilization" after nuclear holocaust. It has three distinct sections, each separated by hundreds of years, centering around life at a desert monastery named in honor of a very unusual "saint". Since each section tells its own story, and could be read separately, I'm going to rate each one separately. PART ONE: FIAT HOMO (5 stars) Tipped off by a mysterious old man (could it be Saint Leibowitz himself?), a nervous novice monk discovers an underground chamber that contains some highly significant relics, for which he suffers abuse from a fearful and sadistic abbot. Eventually, he is sent on a dangerous journey to New Rome, under constant threat from primitive nomads. The ending of this section is rather chilling and ironic, much like a Flannery O'Connor short story. PART TWO: FIAT LUX (3 stars) This is the only section among the three that really is not able to stand alone as a self-contained story with a definitive ending. I suppose this could be considered the "Empire Strikes Back" of the "trilogy". The basis of this part is the mistrust that exists between religion and science, when a scholar visits the monastery to study the ancient Leibowitz documents and finds, to his astonishment, one of the monks has invented (or re-invented) the electric light. The old man reappears (remember, this is hundreds of years after the first story) as a rather significant player in this section, but, ultimately, this story is merely transitional. PART THREE: FIAT VOLUNTUAS TUA (5 stars) I wanted to give this part 6 or 7 stars, but that would be cheating. This last section is absolutely brilliant.

This novel from the 1950's is a deserved classic among the sci-fi intelligentsia. Maybe its laborious title has kept it from being noticed by the popular masses, but this book is a hidden gem for those looking to broaden their horizons. This is probably one of the earliest stories to speculate on a post-nuclear apocalypse, and here Walter Miller created one of the most imaginative and far-reaching examples of that motif. Later nuclear winter stories would get predictable and formulaic, but not this originator. In this masterpiece of storytelling, three ages of human development pass by

over the course of 1800 years, but in the end we see that those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. While it's a bit dated in places, this brilliant and disturbing novel will keep you thinking for a long time after you're done reading it. In addition to its unique take on historical processes, this book is essentially about the pros and cons of organized religion. In Part 1, humanity is stuck in the middle of several centuries of dark ages after a nuclear war, and once again the Catholic Church (or what's left of it) holds sway over a fearful and unenlightened society. Among the few records of the pre-war world that have survived are some inconsequential notes and blueprints by a minor scientist called Leibowitz. The church has made Leibowitz a saint, and here Miller appears to be commenting on the reverence of organized religion toward matters of doubtful authenticity and importance. Is religious belief built upon weak foundations? In Part 2 humanity is entering a new renaissance of knowledge, with religion being unable to adjust to the new enlightenment. In Part 3, humanity has reached a new technical age, but society is again oppressed by nuclear paranoia and mutually assured destruction.

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