“We’ve Been Waiting for a Long Time to See the World Start Taking an Interest in Itself Again”
Libraries and Memory in Walter M. Miller, Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

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Abstract: The novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is analyzed, using the framework of library history and the idea of the library as memory to guide the discussion. The historical function of libraries is compared to the rise of the library at the monastery, and the importance of the library as a symbol of knowledge and human advancement is considered in light of the book’s plot and themes. The place of libraries as memory in the 21st century is discussed.

In the second part of Walter M. Miller, Jr.’s 1959 novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, secular scholar Taddeo Pfardentrott is invited by Abbot Paulo of the monastic Albertian Order of Leibowitz to present his findings based on Taddeo’s study of the library of the monks. However, Taddeo is uncertain if the monks will understand his work, and is also concerned that he will offend the religious beliefs of the order. Paulo, amused, responds, “We’ve been waiting for a long time to see the world start taking an interest in itself again.”¹ The monks, who have been guarding knowledge that ranged from shopping lists to blueprints for electric lights to science textbooks, want to see the knowledge from the past in their library applied and put to good use in a society that has shunned technology, science and intellectual pursuits. Through a study of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, we see the importance of memory in the preservation of culture and knowledge in society; the Memorabilia collected in the library at the monastery of the Order of Leibowitz represent the collective knowledge of humanity. This library is the cultural and scientific memory of a great society that has been lost to nuclear war and is the key for the rise of humanity to its greatest potential. But are some memories best left forgotten, such as how to great weapons of mass destruction, or the hubris that comes when humanity fails to value life itself.

**A Brief History of the Future**

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* is divided into three parts: “Fiat Homo” (Let there be Man), “Fiat Lux” (Let there be Light) and “Fiat Voluntas Tua” (Let Thy Will be Done). Each section roughly starts 600 years apart, with the first taking place in the 26th century, part two in 3174, and the third section in 3781. The book is set in the American Southwest after a 20th century

¹ Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (New York: Bantam, 1959), 199.
nuclear war destroyed much of civilization, leading the survivors to shun intellectualism and technology, believing that literacy and scholarship led to the destruction of society and the rise of mutants. The Great Simplification was a “reactionary countermeasure” against intellectualism, literacy and technology, all considered to be components of what led to nuclear war, the destruction of civilization and the rise of mutant mobs. The Simpletons burned scholars, books and even entire libraries in order to prevent the threat of total destruction again. Monasteries were also burned for holding sacred books and giving refuge to intellectuals. The Simpleton attitude was passed through the generations, so children of the original Simpletons were taught to hate knowledge, and when the intellectuals were killed or in hiding, even just being literate became a death sentence.

Isaac Edward Leibowitz, an American Jewish engineer and weapons designer who sought refuge among Catholic monks started the Albertian Order of Leibowitz in order to preserve knowledge in hope that the Simpleton movement would eventually end. Leibowitz, a martyr for the cause of the preservation of knowledge, was killed by Simpleton mobs; the Memorabilia is a matter of life or death for the monks. The members of the Order take on a role of either Bookleggers, who smuggled books to bury in the American Southwest, or Memorizers, who committed entire volumes to memory. The work of the Order of Leibowitz centers around the Memorabilia the monks collect, copy and preserve in hope of a society that once again reveres knowledge. The Memorabilia, made up of any written materials the monks can find, represents the knowledge of a great civilization of which little is known. When Canticle begins, 600 years have passed since the nuclear war in the 20th century, and the Simpleton mentality did not pass, as hoped, but become the culture, requiring a continual preservation of the Memorabilia by the monastery. As the novel opens, we see the importance of the Memorabilia from a religious perspective, but we also see vestiges of its importance as a memory of society and humanity.

Preserving Memory

“Fiat Homo” focuses on Brother Francis Gerard of Utah, who we meet as a novice during his Lenten fast in the desert surrounding the abbey of the Order of Leibowitz. After meeting an

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old Wanderer, he falls into an ancient fallout shelter that has documents that appear to be created by Leibowitz, such as blueprints, and a shopping list. Upon Francis’s return to the abbey, Abbot Arkos tries to quash any rumors about the Wanderer and the relics discovered by Francis, as Leibowitz is currently only a beatified martyr and has not achieved sainthood status, and fantastic claims about the founder of the order could delay his canonization. As Francis becomes a full initiate into the order, he begins work as a copyist in the scriptorium; one of his projects is an embellished illumination, complete with gold leaf, of a blueprint he discovered in the fallout shelter ruins. Several years after the discovery of the relics, New Rome (located in the Eastern United States) allows the canonization of Leibowitz to go forward, and Francis is sent to the Pope as the abbey’s envoy, taking with him the illuminated blueprint and its original copy. Mutants rob Francis of the illuminated copy, and after visiting New Rome, the Pope gives Francis gold to purchase it back from the mutants. On his return trip to the abbey, he is killed by the same band of mutants and buried by the Wanderer.

The monastery in “Fiat Homo” resembles medieval monasteries in the Roman Catholic Church; this is intentional, showing the Church as the preserver of humanity during a new dark age, much as monasteries have done in other times of upheaval. There is also another connection to medieval monasteries; during his time serving on a bomber during World War II, Miller participated in the bombing of the Monte Cassino monastery in Italy, an experience that would both haunt and inspire him when writing A Canticle for Leibowitz. Monte Cassino was founded in 529 by Benedict; his rule for his monastery drew from the monastic foundations set by the hermit and monk Pachomius, who declared that monks would be literate. Benedict’s rules included provisions for monks to receive a book for reading, and time was set aside throughout the year for reading. Whether or not Miller was aware of the connection between the importance of literate monks at the founding of the Monte Cassino monastery and Canticle does not downplay the significance of the historical connection between religious organizations and the preservation of knowledge.

Miller’s future is framed in a Catholic understanding of history; when a major power falls, the Church alone protects society when chaos and “barbarians” come into power. The fall of Rome predicated the so-called Dark Ages, and the fall of the European-American civilization

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brings the rule of the Simpletons and a disregard for literacy and knowledge to humanity.\(^5\) Battles writes:

Long before the fall of Rome, Plato and Aristotle both came to the conclusion that there is no political system that doesn’t suffer decline. As a not-so-minor corollary to this rule, it could be added that there is no library that does not ultimately disappear, leaving a lacuna for future generations to puzzle over … by bringing books together in one place, cultures and kings inevitably make of them a sacrifice to time.\(^6\)

Miller’s work takes on a cyclical aspect, with the past being repeated during the course of the book. Fiat Homo shares similarities to the monasteries (and their libraries) of medieval Earth, holding materials and preserving texts in their scriptoriums, as well as through memorization.\(^7\)

The monastery library in *Canticle* shares a few features with medieval libraries. One of the most pronounced features are the chained books and sealed archives for protecting the Memorabilia. Some of the more valuable facsimile copies are chained to protect them from the residents of the nearby village of Sanly Bowitts. However, the original fragments of materials that date back to the 20th century are stored in airtight, lead-sealed caskets, in order to preserve them for as long as possible. Of chained libraries, Lopez writes, “Today, with millions of people surfing the Internet, with libraries everywhere challenged by decreased public funding, the survival of the Hereford Chained Library is instructive. It represents a time when the written word was precious, very precious indeed.”\(^8\) The chains on the books prevent the Simpletons from raiding the monastery and stealing them to be burnt, and they also keep them safe from the descendents of the Simpletons who feel like they need to start their own library by the 32nd century. The Order is preserving the Memorabilia for the children of those who wish to destroy it, then keeping it safe and orderly for when the time comes for closer inspection of its contents.

Brother Francis puts time in the scriptorium as his worldly work in the Order, showing another important aspect of monastic life. Christian monasteries may have had scriptoriums from

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\(^5\) Tietge, “Priest, Professor, or Prophet,” 677.


\(^7\) Dominic Mangeniello, “History and Judgment as Promise in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” *Science Fiction Studies* 13, no. 2 (July 1986): 160.

the late 2nd or early 3rd centuries for the purpose of copying religious texts. While Benedict’s Monte Cassino library likely did not have a scriptorium, Cassiodorus’s Vivarium monastery and school that emerged roughly the same time encouraged scribes to copy both religious and secular works, creating as many books as required, creating a library that encompassed the knowledge of the known world. Of the work of copyists in medieval monastic libraries Peterson writes, “The monk’s daily work evolved quite naturally from the farm to the scriptorium, where the work of copying texts also aided the monk in memorizing them for prayer.”

Francis’s own illumination of a Leibowitzian blueprint emphasizes the symbolic importance of the Memorabilia, despite the fact that no one in the monastery (or New Rome) really understands the significance. In the 26th century, the monks have embraced copying texts in lieu of complete memorization; as the Simpleton movement tapered off, physical copies became less likely to be destroyed. The importance of memorization is not lost on the monks, as many early works in the monastery were created from the memory of the monks, their spiritual discipline helping to save the memory of humanity. Peterson compares the Pachimonian practice of memorization of Scripture to the Jewish practice of wearing phylacteries—each is a commitment of holy writ to the life of the believer.

While the Memorabilia of the Order of Leibowitz is not sacred material per se, the work of the monks in copying, memorizing and preserving the texts is a form of prayer in action, a constant act of love for the world and humanity, based in their Christian faith.

“Fiat Homo” is a story of the preservation of texts, and waiting for the hope of a time when the world becomes interested in its heritage and picks up where it left off. Miller narrates, “The monks waited. It mattered not at all to them that the knowledge they saved was useless, that much of it was not really knowledge now, was as inscrutable to the monks in some instances as it would be to an illiterate wild-boy from the hills; this knowledge was empty of content, its subject matter long since gone.” Even though the monks did not understand the materials they preserved, the monks saw value in the structure of the information they contained, that even if the original meanings of the texts were lost to time, they were preserving a symbolic

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12 Ibid., 327.
13 Miller, *Canticle*, 66.
understanding of knowledge that could one day be knitted together by an “Integrator.” But who is this person? It will be 600 years before there is a potential answer to that question.

**Recovering Memory**

“Fiat Lux” is the second part of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, beginning in 3174. Much of the North American continent is still overrun with mutants and nomads, with war between factions an imminent possibility, but interest in and rediscovery of the natural sciences is occurring in the capital of Texarkana. Taddeo Pfardentrott, a scholar and thon (a honorary title similar to professor), receives a letter from the Order of Leibowitz encouraging him to visit the abbey and review the Memorabilia, including names such as Einstein in the list of documents the Order has collected as an enticement. Taddeo attempts to convince a cardinal to write to the abbey to compel them to send the Memorabilia to the capitol of Texarkana. His reasoning is rational—by bringing the documents to Taddeo’s collegium, the entire group can validate the Memorabilia, and Taddeo will not appear to be influenced by the religious nature of the monastery. However, being faithful stewards of their materials, an interlibrary loan is denied, forcing Taddeo to travel to the American Southwest. However, he cannot understand why the monks hold onto the books and other materials in their relatively inaccessible monastery that does not have decent facilities for research, not understanding the spiritual significance the monks place on the Memorabilia as a symbol of their work and the memory of humanity.

While many of the brothers are excited about Taddeo’s discoveries and his visit to the library, Brother Armbruster, the librarian, is only concerned about the preservation of the texts. Miller narrates, “To Brother Librarian [Armbruster], whose task in life was the preservation of books, the principal reason for the existence of the books was that they might be preserved perpetually. Usage was secondary, and to be avoided if it threatened longevity.”14 While the monks and Taddeo have copies of the texts, the originals were considered more important when looking at mathematical formulas, to avoid viewing mistakes in transcription. Armbruster, unfortunately, cannot see past the tomes themselves to the knowledge contained inside of them; the Memorabilia is sacred in the sense that it is a relic, the copying and preservation a ritual. This is not necessarily a problem, as long as there are other monks who are willing to share the

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14 Ibid., 197.
materials; having a custodian who is concerned about the longevity of the texts is vital to a library, and is perhaps part of the reason why the Memorabilia have been able to exist for as long as they have.

When Taddeo arrives at the monastery, he is greeted by the lighting of an electrical lamp, a device that Brother Kornhoer creates by following plans in the Memorabilia, and a surprise to Taddeo, as he believed the monks to not have any practical understanding of the Memorabilia’s contents. The light comes as a blow to Taddeo’s ego. Taddeo’s research at the monastery has shown him that the theories he believed he formulated are simply rediscoveries of what the world has found before him. “Fiat Lux” refers to more than the light provided by Kornhoer’s machine, but the light that has been brought to humanity through the work of the Order. A crucifix in the library is removed to make room for the electric light, as the location is deemed the optimal position for the light to reach the entire library. Later, during Taddeo’s visit, after Paulo and Taddeo argue over the motives of the scholar, the monks return the crucifix to its place and resume reading by candlelight, an indictment of the means of using the monastery’s holy writings to cultivate secular power and glory; the light created by the plans in the Memorabilia cannot outshine the light of Christ and the importance of being the memory of humanity.

A skeptic, Taddeo doubts the accuracy of the Memorabilia as historical fact, which is not a concern of the monks of the abbey; many of them view their own sacred texts (such as the creation story in Genesis) as allegory, and many of the early post-war histories are seen as embellishments, with one taking on the guise of a Job-like parable. Taddeo sees a non-literal understanding of history as a way for the monks to rewrite history to make it fit their worldview. However, such an understanding of the intentions of the Order is based on Taddeo’s suspicion of religion, not any evidence. For centuries, the monks have faithfully preserved whatever writings they could find, seeing the written word as a supreme monument to the creative work of God through humanity. Seeing that Leibowitz was burned on a pile of books, the flames of the martyrs are kindled with knowledge, giving the monks an incentive to provide an accurate window into the past. Perhaps Taddeo is somewhat jealous that the monastery’s careful collecting and copying of past “averts a complete cultural sabotage” when he has been unable to crack all the mysteries of the natural sciences.\textsuperscript{15} Taddeo sees a new future that will be led by humans of intelligence who eschew ignorance and superstition for science and reason, but it will

\textsuperscript{15} Mangenello, “History as Judgment,” 161.
be a difficult and destructive change, as on one hand, the Simpletons have entrenched themselves as leaders of the post-war world, and on the other, the largest known collection of written knowledge is held by a religious group. Taddeo does not specifically endorse the military ambitions of his cousin Hannegan, leader of Texarkana, but he sees no reason to oppose them either, as it will be a necessary part of humanity’s progress. As long as the rulers of Texarkana are subsidizing his work, his collegium can continue its work, and humanity prospers, at least, until war returns.

While talking to Benjamin, the Old Jew (who may be the Wanderer Francis encountered in the desert), Abbot Paulo shows his concern for the role of the monastery as humanity returns to science and reason; he says, “For twelve centuries, we’ve been one little island in a very dark ocean. Keeping the Memorabilia has been a thankless job, but we’ve always been bookleggers and memorizers, and it’s hard to think that the job’s soon to be finished—soon to become unnecessary.”\(^\text{16}\) Despite not understanding what the Memorabilia means fully, it represented knowledge, a structure of thought that once held up a great civilization. The monks are waiting for someone to come and make sense of what they have received, an intellectual messiah to supplement the spiritual messianic return of Christ. Whichever one comes first is of no concern to the monks, as if Christ returns, all knowledge will be fulfilled in all people, but if the rise of humanity begins through the return of scholars, they will be ready for the return of interest in science and scholarship. Benjamin, an Old Jew, looking for the messiah confronts Taddeo in the monastery, and after eyeing the scholar, declares, “It’s still not Him.”\(^\text{17}\) Benjamin has been looking for the Messiah, according to him, for hundreds of years, and yet no spiritual, political or scientific leader has risen to the occasion, just as the monks of the Order have been looking for an Integrator. Perhaps Taddeo is neither spiritual messiah nor scientific integrator. Yet the guarding of the Memorabilia will remain the task of the Order of Leibowitz as they wait patiently for humanity to realize what the past knowledge they hold onto means. However, the monks are unsure of is their continued role once humanity is able to grasp the significance of the Memorabilia, and more learned minds are able to interpret and transform the Memorabilia into greater knowledge, and hopefully wisdom. Unfortunately, as we see in part three, this is not the case.

\(^\text{16}\) Miller, *Canticle*, 175.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 216.
Forgetting Memory

In the third section of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, “Fiat Voluntas Tua”, the world has surpassed the technological level of the mid-20th century, with advanced computers, spacecraft, and colonies in outer space, but in addition to the technological marvels that have been created, nuclear weapons have also been in existence for two centuries. The two major world powers have been in a Cold War for fifty years, and a nuclear explosion of indeterminate origin in Asia threatens the peace. The Order of Leibowitz is still holding on to the Memorabilia, the mission now expanded to include all human knowledge; to protect the memory of humanity and keep the Church alive if the Earth is destroyed, the monastery has a plan to evacuate the Order to the Alpha Centuari system in case of a nuclear war. As news of the nuclear disaster spreads across the world, New Rome approves the plan in anticipation of mass destruction. There is little hope that the world will recover from the incident, and even the Pope has ceased to pray for peace.

While the Order’s transition from a terrestrial monastery to a mission to distant colonies may seem to be the easy way out, they are taking their mission to humanity in other parts of the galaxy, keeping knowledge alive and preserving the Christian message. The monks’ vocation in space and the colonies is to be the memory of humanity. There is the concept of worldly, scientific memory by keeping human knowledge alive, but also a spiritual memory, the continuation of the Church and the teachings of Christ. Abbot Jethrah Zerchi convinces one of the brothers of the Order, Joshua, to accept the position of abbot for the mission into space; Zerchi says to Joshua, “Be for Man the memory of Earth and Origin. Remember this Earth. Never forget her, but—*never come back*.” In one sense, remembering the good of humanity will require the Order forgetting the Earth in anticipation of the space colonies, the new (worldly) hope of men and women. The memory of humanity goes on, but that memory can no longer be sustained on the Earth.

In retaliation for the nuclear disaster in Asia, a bomb is dropped on the capital of Texarkana, killing millions and spreading radiation west to the American Southwest and the vicinity of the abbey. From this framework, Miller expounds on morality and memory. Of memory, Mary Carruthers writes, “A person without a memory, if such a thing could be, would

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18 Ibid., 292.
be a person without moral character and, in a basic sense, without humanity.”19 Another plot element in “Fiat Voluntas Tua” involves Zerchi allowing government doctors to set up camp by the monastery to treat radiation victims, but only under the condition that no euthanasia orders are given. When a doctor violates this agreement, Zerchi reacts in anger, hitting him. For Zerchi, the concept of euthanasia is a sin, but even more troubling is that the government is endorsing it because they know what will happen if there is another nuclear war. The consequences of the war of the 20th century shows that fallout can be deadly, but the memory of the devastation has been forgotten Zerchi says, “The very existence of the Radiation Disaster Act … is the plainest possible evidence that governments were fully aware of the consequences of another war, but instead of trying to make the crime impossible, they tried to provide in advance for the consequences of the crime.”20 Memory has been forgotten, humanity becomes disposable, death is an escape from the horror of living. Catholic moral theology aside, morality is, in a sense, a kind of cultural memory, an ethos for living and a concept that builds off of the desire to build a society for the common good. By planning for humanity’s destruction and providing for the killing of victims with high doses of radiation, memory of the value of humanity has been lost.

Inevitably, the cease-fire reached after the bombing of the capitol is breached, and complete war is at hand. As the nuclear warheads scream through the air, Joshua shakes the dust off his sandals as he enters the spacecraft, uttering “Sic transit mundus” (thus passes the world) just before the ship takes off. The monks leave earth with the Memorabilia on microfilm. The Memorabilia, now the comprehensive collection of human knowledge, shows the importance of the monks’ work of continuing their task as bookleggers and memorizers. The Memorabilia, advanced or primitive in its nature, is a symbol of human knowledge. The colony on Alpha Centuari is likely highly advanced and has no need for Leibowitz’s engineering blueprints or grocery list, but taking all the Memorabilia represents the survival of knowledge that was able to rebuild human civilization from its ashes after the first nuclear war, and the encompassing collection will play a part in the return of civilization again. As the ship departs, Joshua thinks, “It isn’t hope for Earth, but hope for the soul and substance of Man somewhere.”21 In the Memorabilia are undoubtedly plans for weapons, some nuclear, formulas for poisons for

20 Miller, Canticle, 295.
21 Ibid., 286.
euthanasia, and the exploits of tyrants and dictators who killed for power. However, there is the hope that even through the preservation of these awful things, there is hope that humanity will learn from its mistakes, will know that even though humans are exceedingly efficient at killing each other, it is not the only path humanity can go down. But what is the difference between the Order of Leibowitz planning to leave the Earth and the government’s plan for euthanasia for radiation victims? The monks have a contingency plan, just as the governments do, likely because they understand the destructive nature of humanity as well as anyone. However, the Memorabilia represents hope, of a return to civilization, while the euthanasia laws are the end of hope, the belief that there is no other road, no return to better health, no spiritual benefit in facing God, to the end, through pain and suffering.

**Libraries as Memorabilia in the 21st Century**

How does *A Canticle for Leibowitz* fit into the history of libraries? It is, after all, a fictional work set in a post-nuclear war future that is not likely to come to pass; the Cold War fears of global thermonuclear war have been replaced with the concern over targeted, independent acts of terrorism. We are not as likely to be concerned about complete annihilation as we are worried about if the person next to us on a plane is going to blow it up. Despite not living in the shadow of the mushroom cloud, though, the importance of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is not diminished. Wood sees *A Canticle for Leibowitz* as a work in the ancient form of apocalypse, not because of its end-times message of humanity’s destruction, but because it is an apocalypse in the literal sense: an unveiling. Miller’s work shows hope for humanity, a “hope that might yet rescue the world from its otherwise fatal amnesia.”

By seeing what *Canticle* unveils, we can learn a bit more about our own knowledge if we apply the lessons from the novel to our society.

Digitization and archive projects such as Google Books and Archive.org can be, in some ways, compared to the Order’s mission to preserve the Memorabilia. Both are comprehensive attempts to store knowledge and information in one location, although there are highly different motivations. While the monks do it out of a sense of duty to the restoration of humanity and to

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honor the sacrifice of the Order’s founder, digital preservation is done for the sake of the knowledge itself, with no higher authority particularly guiding the collection. Despite the unprecedented access to knowledge that digitization has granted, the complete digital archivization of human knowledge is problematic from a logistics perspective; there is no easy way to catalog or organize it, and it is reliant on technology. For the Simpletons to destroy a completely digital library, they need not destroy the data itself, but just the technology, which may be far easier. Would the bookleggers find value in hard drives and Kindles, and would they even be able to extract the information on them? Over-reliance on technology in the process of preserving texts will cause problems when technology eventually fails. Careful digital management can perhaps increase the longevity of the materials, but when the power goes out, a book can still be read.

Even with the preservation of printed materials, there is always the question of what should be included in a collection. Not every book in a library is popular or in continuous circulation; some books are weeded, some are lost or destroyed, and some sit on shelves in perpetuity. Some books contain practical information that can be applied across time and disciplines, others are useful as historical documents, and a few have no redeeming value. However, as a whole, they represent something greater than the sum of their parts—the library represents both the collective memory of humanity and the foundation for its future. Even if the materials are digital and the library itself is a computer lab, or even just a website, it remains a house of knowledge, as a place for learning. In this sense, one task of libraries is simply to be a place for books to exist, whether or not they are being used. In the deep recesses of the stacks lies a book, covered in dust, that may contain knowledge that could be used in decades or centuries to come, that will be part of the memory of our society. The monks in A Canticle for Leibowitz lean heavily on the preservation of printed materials, no matter their significance on historical events. When the archiving of a shopping list or a tax form can be considered a holy task, perhaps value can be seen in preserving the multitude of digital data as well, be it email, Facebook posts, or, such as in the case of the Library of Congress, Twitter feeds.

Miller committed suicide in 1996, never publishing another novel in his lifetime; the creation of fiction was an autobiographical process for Miller, and he found his own life too shameful to continue writing.23 A sequel to A Canticle for Leibowitz was nearly completed at the

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time of his death and published in 1997, the last memory of a man who wrote stories loved by millions. Fortunately for the fans of his work, his writings have been printed and shelved in libraries, digitized and stored online, placed into the cultural memory. Even though Miller is gone, the memory he created has continued; the hope is that the words will remain part of this memory, helping us better understand our own humanity and ourselves.
Bibliography


