



AMERICAN

LITERATURE

Science Fiction Reflects Cold War Fears

1950–1959 Many writers of science fiction draw on the scientific and social trends of the present to describe future societies that might arise if those trends were to continue. Nuclear proliferation, the space race, early computer technology, and the pervasive fear of known and unknown dangers during the Cold War were the realities that prompted a boom in science fiction during the 1950s and 1960s.

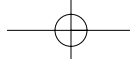
THE BODY SNATCHERS

Published in 1955 at the height of the Great Fear, Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* (on which the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was based) tells of giant seed pods from outer space that descend on the inhabitants of a California town. The pods create perfect physical duplicates of the townspeople and lack only one thing—human souls.

"Miles, he looks, sounds, acts, and remembers exactly like Ira. On the outside. But *inside* he's different. His responses"—she stopped, hunting for the word—"aren't *emotionally* right, if I can explain that. He remembers the past, in detail, and he'll smile and say 'You were sure a cute youngster, Willy. Bright one, too,' just the way Uncle Ira did. But there's something *missing*, and the same thing is true of Aunt Aleda, lately." Wilma stopped, staring at nothing again, face intent, wrapped up in this, then she continued. "Uncle Ira was a father to me, from infancy, and when he talked about my childhood, Miles, there was—always—a special look in his eyes that meant he was remembering the wonderful quality of those days for him. Miles, that look, 'way in back of the eyes, is gone. With this—*this* Uncle Ira, or whoever or whatever he is, I have the feeling, the absolutely certain *knowledge*, Miles, that he's talking by rote. That the facts of Uncle Ira's memories are all in his mind in every last detail, ready to recall. But the emotions are not. There *is* no emotion—none—only the pretense of it. The words, the gestures, the tones of voice, everything else—but not the feeling."

Her voice was suddenly firm and commanding: "Miles, memories or not, appearances or not, possible or impossible, that is not my Uncle Ira."

—Jack Finney, *The Body Snatchers* (1955)



THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES

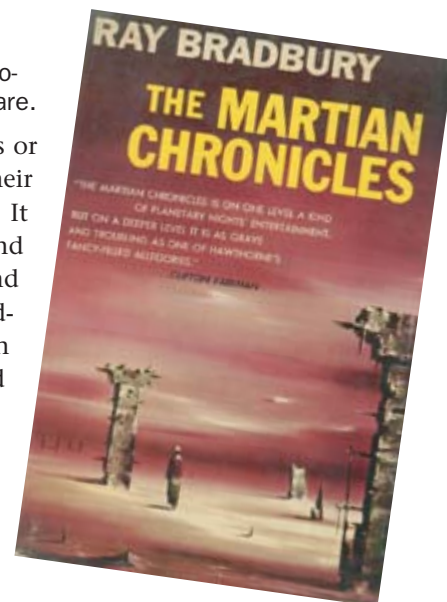
In *The Martian Chronicles*, Ray Bradbury describes how earthlings who have colonized Mars watch helplessly as their former planet is destroyed by nuclear warfare.

They all came out and looked at the sky that night. They left their suppers or their washing up or their dressing for the show and they came out upon their now-not-quite-as-new porches and watched the green star of Earth there. It was a move without conscious effort; they all did it, to help them understand the news they had heard on the radio a moment before. There was Earth and there the coming war, and there hundreds of thousands of mothers or grandmothers or fathers or brothers or aunts or uncles or cousins. They stood on the porches and tried to believe in the existence of Earth, much as they had once tried to believe in the existence of Mars; it was a problem reversed. To all intents and purposes, Earth now was dead; they had been away from it for three or four years. Space was an anesthetic; seventy million miles of space numbed you, put memory to sleep, depopulated Earth, erased the past, and allowed these people here to go on with their work. But now, tonight, the dead were risen, Earth was reinhabited, memory awoke, a million names were spoken: What was so-and-so doing tonight on Earth? What about this one and that one? The people on the porches glanced sidewise at each other's faces.

At nine o'clock Earth seemed to explode, catch fire, and burn.

The people on the porches put up their hands as if to beat the fire out.

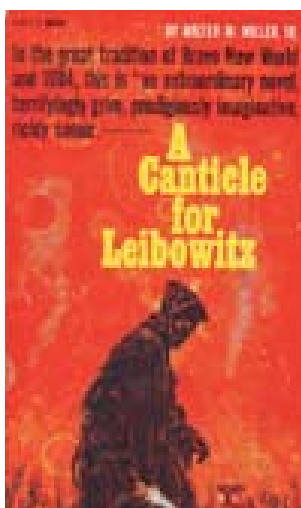
They waited.



—Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (1950)

A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ

In *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Walter M. Miller, Jr., portrays the centuries after a nuclear holocaust as a new “Dark Age” for humanity on earth.



He had been wandering for a long time. The search seemed endless, but there was always the promise of finding what he sought across the next rise or beyond the bend in the trail. When he had finished fanning himself, he clapped the hat back on his head and scratched at his bushy beard while blinking around at the landscape. There was a patch of unburned forest on the hillside just ahead. It offered welcome shade, but still the wanderer sat there in the sunlight and watched the curious buzzards. . . .

Pickings were good for a while in the region of the Red River; but then out of the carnage, a city-state arose. For rising city-states, the buzzards had no fondness, although they approved of their eventual fall. They shied away from Texarkana and ranged far over the plain to the west. After the manner of all living things, they replenished the Earth many times with their kind.

Eventually it was the Year of Our Lord 3174.

There were rumors of war.

—Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959)

THINKING CRITICALLY

- 1. Comparing** What themes, or general messages about life or humanity, do you think these three books convey? How might readers' interpretations of these messages today differ from readers' interpretations during the Cold War?



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R8.

- 2. INTERNET ACTIVITY** CLASSZONE.COM

Visit the links for American Literature to learn more about Ray Bradbury and *The Martian Chronicles*. When was *The Martian Chronicles* published? How does it reflect Cold War fears? What does the writing tell you about Ray Bradbury's view of American society at the time?