

Millennial Fiction

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As used here, the term “millennial” encompasses the adjective “millennial” as applied to fiction written on either side of the “millennium” of the year 2000, by authors of any generation (literary periodization); “Millennial” as an adjective delineating authors born in the decades from around the 1980s to the 1990s (that is, a concept of literary generations); and “millennialism” or “millenarian,” to characterize a rhetoric of the “end of days” present in American literature from the beginnings, a preeminent way the American community has been imagined and reimagined over the course of its history and literature, and how narratives of both the origin and end of the American nation have been imagined apocalyptically. How Millennial fiction merges with the apocalyptic strain across the history of American literature, yet reflects the new information order, social media landscape, and globalized economy corresponding to the growing ethnic diversity of twenty-first-century fiction, will be discussed below. Evidently, the text selection for this entry does not distinguish genre fiction and literature, instead preferring to emphasize thematic groupings of cultural texts.

THE MILLENNIAL THEME IN MILLENNIAL FICTION

The millennial theme of the “end of days” is not unique to writing by Millennials as a generation; indeed, it has typified American literature from the beginning, but seems, perhaps unsurprisingly, to particularly define writing by Millennials in the generational sense. Michael Wigglesworth, the Puritan minister, doctor, and poet whose poem “The Day of Doom” (1662) was a bestseller in early New England, illustrates the influence of millennialist or millenarian rhetoric on an emerging American literature and its sense of national identity in the colonial period (the American as the “new man” after the end of history, God’s Elect in New England as what the poem styles the “chosen Generation”). The rhetoric of apocalypse, millennialism, and end-of-time discourse both founded the national idea of America as the new Republic redeeming the failure of European nationhood, and casts doubt on this foundational rhetoric in narratives of the collapse of the nation and social institutions in American life in various apocalyptic scenarios that will be discussed in more detail below.

Stephen J. Burn’s edited collection of essays, *American Literature in Transition, 1990–2000* (2018), locates American fiction written

around the final decade of the American Century (“millennial” as a term of literary periodization) within the longer arc of millennialism as a theme in American literature, citing such authors as John Updike (*Toward the End of Time* [1997], set in the year 2020); John Barth’s story, “The End: An Introduction” (in *On With the Story* [1996]), a story that is partly a parody of the “end of everything” discourse that Barth says proliferated in the 1990s, what the story refers to as “endism”; Richard Powers’s *Gain* (1998); and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996); to which could be added T.C. Boyle’s *World’s End* (1990), and the mordantly comic post-apocalyptic short fiction of George Saunders in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), among many others.

Another culturally significant strain of the apocalyptic in millennial fiction is the popularity of young adult (YA) fiction that is post-apocalyptic, for example Susan Collins’s *Hunger Games* (*The Hunger Games* [2008]; *Catching Fire* [2009]; and *Mockingjay* [2010]), and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* series, novels that are about surviving after apocalyptic events that have foundered the nation. If the nation is seen to be a broken community, both of these novel cycles portray communities of solidarity (what Thomas Beebe refers to as “apocalyptic communities”) that resist totalitarian control in a postapocalyptic setting. As in much postapocalyptic fiction, nation-states are survived by city-states, and the postapocalyptic landscape is also a post-national one. Other Millennial fiction in the generational sense focusing on postapocalyptic plots set in cities and representative of the increasing ethnic diversity of this genre includes Susan Ee’s *Angelfall* (2012), Julie Kagawa’s *The Immortal Rules* (2013), Tochi Onyebuchi’s *War Girls* (2019), Victoria Lee’s *The Fever King* (2019), N.K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became* (2020), and Lilliam Rivera’s *Dealing in Dreams* (2020).

In Roth’s *Divergent* series, the individual and the body politic correspond: the personality traits identified by the names for the various factions in the postapocalyptic city-scape of Chicago are both individual (discovered through a kind of psychometric testing) and social or collective. The psychologist Joy Paul Guilford, whose concept of “divergent thinking” as nonlinear cognition was influential in theories of intelligence, applied psychometric measurement to creativity similar to how the “divergent” personality of Roth’s books may not be exclusively identified with any one of the factions, mirroring within the fictional world of Roth’s books the tendency of Generations X, Y, and Z to reject exclusive, singular identifications such as nationality, race, gender, or sexuality, but rather to embrace the overdetermination of multiple, intersectional identities (Crenshaw 1991) in belonging to different social groups simultaneously, much as Brett Easton Ellis rejects his identity as a gay man defining his writing, or Ocean Vuong, for whom his gay sexuality seems more significant than his Vietnamese ethnicity.

In the more recent fiction discussed below, Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) represents Millennial novels concerned with the theme of apocalypse. Space does not allow for consideration of Cherokee author Daniel H. Wilson’s *Robopocalypse* (2011), or its successor, *Robogenesis* (2014), but they could easily be prime examples of science fiction genre conventions involving artificial intelligence as what Thomas Beebe (2009) dubs “eschatechnology” and “reflective dissonance,” as it relates to Native American reimaginings of “Western” genres. One of the recent trends among Gen X and Millennial Native American authors is the turn to genre fiction, especially apocalyptic science fiction, by Ohkay Pueblo author Rebecca Roanhorse, Blackfeet author Stephen Graham Jones, and others. In Native American fiction, apocalyptic scenarios represent an imaginative vision of a history in which the

apocalypse has already occurred to Native people with the European conquest. To examples like these could be added realist fiction such as Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* [*Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*] (2015), a novel reflecting what anthropologist Ruth Behar (1993) termed "translated" identities addressing the transnational experiences of border crossers from Mexico and Latin America, which, although not an example of apocalyptic science fiction like the others, does open with a striking scene centering on the portentous sign of the end of the world for a man, a dog, and a cat, who are swallowed up when a sinkhole rips a breach in the road, a dreamlike, apocalyptic episode recalling Chicano author Tomás Rivera's novel, *...and the Earth Did Not Devour Him* [*... y no se lo tragó la tierra*] (1971).

THE NEW WORK ORDER IN MILLENNIAL FICTION

Ling Ma, author of *Severance*, was born in China and emigrated to the United States, where she received an MFA in writing from Cornell. Her debut novel, *Severance*, is a cross-over, genre-straddling novel blending elements of Millennial workplace fiction, immigration stories, and apocalyptic survivor fiction like the genre classic *Earth Abides* by George R. Stewart (1949). In *Severance*, a SARS or Wuhan coronavirus-type global pandemic originating in the Shenzhen region of China causes its victims to withdraw into an autistic-like solipsistic condition in which they continue to carry out repetitive, habitual tasks while becoming increasingly absorbed in their interior personal memories, like quasi-zombies, before succumbing physically. The disease, it is suspected, spreads through the transnational global exchanges of people and things characterizing the distributed global networks of the new capitalist economy, such as the specialized publish-

ing production firm, Spectra, where the novel's narrator, Candace Chen, is employed producing boutique Bibles. With its corporate headquarters in New York City and its supply chain in China, the firm epitomizes the replacement of the traditional workplace, of industrial mass-market capitalism in which corporations were located primarily within the boundaries of nation-states by the geographically distributed, science-and-technology-driven "fast" capitalism, in which the application of information technology to production makes possible "mass customization," just-in-time production for specialized niche markets for which competition is extremely fierce and which must be able to rapidly and flexibly adapt, as opposed to traditional, "Fordist" mass production before the end of World War II (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996).

In Ma's novel, the apocalyptic event of the nation's collapse is referred to unoriginally (deliberately so) as The End, and the chapters of the novel alternate between the narrator's struggle to survive in the postapocalyptic scenario with a small group of fellow survivors and chapters flashing back to events leading up to The End, or more distant memories of Candace Chen's childhood or early adulthood, including her moving from Salt Lake City, Utah to New York City as a young adult after the death of her parents. Early chapters detail Candace's relocation to New York City, where she begins a photoblog titled "New York City Ghost" featuring cell phone camera snapshots of the urban landscape of the city, explaining at one point that the "ghost" of her blog's title is herself. The motif of the "ghost" in *Severance*, echoed in the fictive corporation Spectra, possibly reverberates with "ghosting," a term used in social media and dating for the social distancing of someone totally withdrawing from all communication without explanation (like the "zombies" of the novel). Regardless, when Candace describes herself as a

“ghost,” she portrays herself as “walking around aimlessly, without anywhere to go, anything to do,” just a “specter haunting the scene” (Ma 2018, p. 41).

The kind of management literature surveyed by Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) is parodied in Ma’s novel by the economist and author Steven Reitman, the title of whose fictional book, *You’re Not the Boss of Me: Labor Values and Work Ethic Among America’s Millennial Youth*, reflects the generational gap between older, Boomer-era managers and their Generation X and Y employees, and the complaints about the alleged “slacker” work ethic among Millennials in the workforce. This new work order constructs employees as no longer “workers” but “associates” or “partners,” socialized into the “vision” and values of the company to which everyone owes a total commitment, employees who are “empowered” to take on more of the routine administrative tasks over their own productivity that used to be performed by middle-level managers, must be “eager to stay” but “ready to leave” when the needs for flexibility and adaptivity of the corporation demand (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996, p. 19). And indeed Candace herself displays exactly these characteristics of the ideal employee in the new capitalist work order. At one point she writes, “They kept me on because my output was prolific and they could task me with more and more production assignments. When I focused, a trait I exhibited at the beginning of my time there, I could be detail-oriented to the point of obsession” (pp. 16–17), illustrating the “over-the-top” dedication of workers in the new capitalist economy. Her boyfriend, Jonathan, too, we learn, once worked as an assistant editor at an independent cultural magazine in Chicago, which he leaves when it is acquired by a larger media company. His description of the corporate culture that induced him to leave

lampoons the “flexible” structure and conditions of work in fast capitalism:

By the end of his first year, the corporate owners made changes to the vacation benefits policy: Instead of allowing for unlimited roll-over vacation days, they would only rollover a maximum of ten from that year to the next. In response, some of the older employees, many of whom had been there since the eighties, took early retirement in order to capitalize on the months’ worth of vacation days they’d amassed before the policy could go into effect. It was essentially a forced retirement of senior employees with higher salaries.

(2018, p. 136)

The passage continues with one of the few references to “severance” in the novel:

By the end of his second year, corporate announced that policy regarding severance packages would be changed. Severance would no longer be scaled according to the number of years that employees had worked, but the company would provide a flat fee for all employees who’d worked there for fewer than ten years. Within the following year, almost all of the senior staff had been laid off, given their diminished severance payouts. The editor who’d hired him was also let go.

(2018, pp. 136–137)

The theme of “severance” in Ma’s novel, then, corresponds to an economic order in which the cutting of contractual bonds between employees and their employers foregrounds how ties between individuals and various communities or systems become unstable, and how individuals withdraw within themselves with the breakdown of community.

Candace and Jonathan in Ling Ma’s novel are thus prototypical Millennial workers in the new, knowledge-based economy organized by the application of information technology to production, and the globally distributed

networks of supply and production characteristic of late capitalism, a new work order in which the boundaries between national markets have been erased, and in which “motivated” workers acting independently as “partners” within the organization cannot be “bossed” around by supervisors as in traditional command, hierarchical workplaces, but must be “developed” and “coached” to internalize the vision and purpose of the corporation and, independently or in teams, carry out provisional work assignments, and in which the traditional lifelong career has been superseded by a “personal portfolio” one carries from temporary work assignment to temporary work assignment. The result of this new work order is the frequently underemployed or unemployed status of many Millennial workers, who find themselves engaged in aimless activity when employed at all, wandering around directionlessly like the “fevered” near-zombies of *Severance*.

Ling Ma’s novel, then, despite the superficial genre conventions associating it with “survival fiction” and postapocalyptic fiction, is really nothing so much as a “workplace novel” along the lines of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* (2011). In this, it could be joined with Helen DeWitt’s *Lightning Rods* (2011), Catherine Lacey’s *The Answers* (2017), Halle Butler’s novel, *The New Me* (2019), and Hilary Leichter’s *Temporary* (2020), among others.

The globalization of capital flows and workplaces enabled by the application of information technology to production under the “new work order” (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996) represents a postnational phase of capitalism, in contrast to the nationally based corporations under the Fordist, mass production economic order of the period from the early twentieth century to the early 1970s, a transformed workplace about which millennial fiction seemingly confirms the adage that

“it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009, p. 2).

ETHNIC, CULTURAL, AND GENDER DIVERSITY OF MILLENNIAL FICTION

Werner Sollors’s concept of ethnic modernism, as the incorporation of ethnic difference within the perpetual renewal and regeneration of American literature (*Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, 1986), as well as the “translated” experience earlier associated with Yuri Herrera’s *Signs Preceding the End of the World* (2015), could also describe novels illustrating the increasingly globalized, transnational character of Millennial American fiction, such as the Balkan magical realism of Téa Obreht’s *The Tiger’s Wife: A Novel* (2011); the debut novel of Yaa Gyasi, born in Ghana, raised in Alabama, and a graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, *Homegoing* (2016); and Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), all novels of memory about other homelands by foreign-born, American-based younger authors, and examples of the increasingly ethnically diverse character of Millennial fiction resulting from the high representation of immigrant authors in it.

Thomas Beebe, in *Millennial Literatures of the Americas, 1492–2002* (2009), describes literature as an “eschatechnology” (pp. 6–7 and passim) and identifies how a dominant discourse of millennialism in the Protestant tradition is answered by what he calls the “reflective dissonance” by which this rhetoric becomes hybridized in the Americas as it is contested by racial or ethnic “others,” an observation carrying over into the increasing diversity of American fiction in this survey. However, while American fiction has become increasingly ethnically diverse during the decades since the 1980s, a tendency has

simultaneously emerged in Millennial authors in the generational sense toward a post-ethnic sensibility in a way to be discussed further, below.

Standing out among authors in her concerns with reenvisioning national history from the kind of hybridized perspective Thomas Beebe refers to as “reflective dissonance” is Boomer-generation, Laguna Pueblo Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko, whose most ambitious novels bracket the decade of the 1990s and, like other authors previously mentioned, frequently illustrate the traits of both what Linda Hutcheon (1988) called “historiographic metafiction” and a concern with millennialist, apocalyptic themes, most obviously in her novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), but also *Garden in the Dunes* (1999). Silko’s fiction employs a sweeping, ironic, critical perspective of American history that shares this quality with other writers of “historiographic metafiction” previously mentioned, but inscribing the dissenting perspective of Native Americans and others culturally marginalized that is more centered on ethnicity and cultural difference than other more culturally mainstream authors. Native American authors like Daniel H. Wilson and Leslie Marmon Silko undertake to counter “terminal narratives,” as anthropologist Michael V. Wilcox has called them, of Native American cultural extinction, by emphasizing the survival and cultural persistence of Native Americans, or what Gerald Vizenor dubbed “post-Indian” identity.

POST-ETHNICITY AND THE END OF HISTORY IN MILLENNIAL AMERICAN FICTION

Otessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation: A Novel* (2018) has been described as “slacker fiction,” but it could be better characterized as a novel of fatigue, ennui, and

idleness related to underemployment of Millennials, rather than “slacking,” exactly.

A deracinated narrative sensibility is conveyed in a novel by a Persian American author whose narrator is a blond WASP woman (because why not write about a character from the most culturally validated, desirable elite), whose own body image ideal is Whoopi Goldberg, reflecting a trend in Millennial fiction in the generational sense toward a post-ethnic sensibility. The narrator describes her boss at an art gallery where she gets one of her first jobs in New York City as “the kind of mysteriously ethnic woman who would blend in easily in almost any country. She could have been from Istanbul or Paris or Morocco or Moscow or New York or San Juan or even Phnom Penh in a certain light, depending on how she wore her hair” (Moshfegh 2018, p. 36). Culture, ethnicity, and nationality are indeterminate in a way that is characteristic of much Millennial fiction.

The novel’s narrator works not because she needs to (her inheritance from her deceased parents provides her financial independence), but because if she “did normal things – held down a job, for example,” she could “starve off the part of me that hated everything” (2018, p. 33). About her job at the art gallery she says, “for the most part, the little effort I put into the job was enough” (p. 36). At the art gallery job, the narrator starts taking hour-long naps during lunch break, sneaking them in the supply closet at the gallery, which starts the narrator’s need for even more sleep, what she calls going into “hibernation,” self-sedating with Ativan, Ambien, and Nembutals and other pill combinations, and little else all day, thinking that if she could just sleep all day, she could “become a whole new person” (p. 26), like the character Millie in Halle Butler’s *The New Me*, or Mary Parsons and the Identity Distance Therapy in Catherine Lacey’s *The Answers*, and could forget the feeling of being dead and hating everybody (p. 19). The urge

to sleep, what the narrator dubs “somnia” or “somnia,” reflects the deep desire and narrative structure in American literature and culture for self-regeneration or renewal. Sleeping all day “felt productive. Something was getting sorted out. I knew . . . that when I’d slept enough, I’d be okay. I’d be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories. My past life would be but a dream, and I could start over without regrets, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that I would have accumulated in my year of rest and relaxation” (p. 51). Upon being fired from her job at the art gallery, the narrator describes her reaction to her last day on the job: “There was no sadness or nostalgia, only disgust that I’d wasted so much time on unnecessary labor when I could have been sleeping and feeling nothing” (p. 49). The theme of “wasted” time recurs in writing by Millennials, the sense of life spent roiling around in futile activities, allying its sensibility with nothing so much as Marcel Proust’s epic a century earlier of wasted time, *temps perdu*, which has been translated variously as “lost time” or “things past,” but contextually, within the framework of Proust’s novel, conveys strong connotations of wasted time, time spent in vain, frivolous or useless activities. “Time, I guess, passes,” says Millie, in Butler’s *The New Me* (2019, p. 67), dilating the sentence with the diffidence of how time is passed.

Besides being a workplace novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a 9/11 novel, the narrator of which has been seeking oblivion for the year leading up to September 11, only to wake to the horrible reality of that day at the end of the book. Passages describing the narrator’s perfunctory forays into the New York City dating scene resembling Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1997) provide the background necessary to understand her choice of a first pick-up boyfriend, Trevor,

who works for an investment bank in the World Trade Center, whom she prefers to the art school hipster guys who “focused on ‘abstract ideas’ and developed drinking problems to blot out the self-loathing they preferred to call ‘existential ennui’” (Moshfegh 2018, p. 33), even though he is just manipulating the narrator as a rebound girlfriend between affairs with older women. As the narrator undertakes her “relaxation project,” she experiments with different drug combinations to induce her desired state of semi-aware borderline unconsciousness, spending her days on the sofa eating animal crackers and watching second-hand video tapes on what was already, in the year 2000, becoming obsolete technology, to be replaced by DVDs and, later, streaming media. As the novel progresses, the narrator discovers that while she was asleep, she has been sleepwalking, a plausible side effect of the drugs she has been taking. She wakes to find the furniture in her apartment rearranged, cartons of uneaten takeout food stacked here and there, or containers of melted ice cream, new clothes she does not remember buying, subscriptions to magazines she does not recall ordering, new credit cards she cannot remember applying for; she finds that she has been online chatting with strangers without remembering it, uncannily realizing that while she has been asleep, she has not been doing nothing, but rather leading a double life hidden from herself, in which she does things uncharacteristic of herself she cannot recall doing. Her friend Reva periodically interrupts the narrator’s pill-induced haze seeking consolation which the narrator is unable to give her for her mother’s death and break-up with her supervisor with whom she’s been having an affair. To get rid of her, the supervisor has had Reva promoted to a new position working for a counterterrorism firm located in the Twin Towers (p. 203). It is January 2011. The climactic image of the novel is one of the

terrible, iconic 9/11 images, which the narrator accidentally sees on the television news coverage because her VHS player has broken down and she can no longer doze off with videos, the female counterpart of the “Falling Man” of Don DeLillo’s novel of that title, of a woman tumbling into space from the 78th floor of the south tower, one of the “jumpers” whose unidentifiable figures outline both the individuality and anonymity of the victims, who reminds the narrator of Moshfegh’s novel of her friend, Reva, whom she knows she will never see again, but who is just a “human being, diving into the unknown . . . wide awake” (p. 289).

The relaxation project of the narrator of Moshfegh’s novel and the Shen Fever zombies of Ling Ma’s *Severance* similarly point to the way in which many Millennials in more recent fiction feel self-alienated from their own lives, highly intelligent narrators trapped in repetitive, routine jobs and actions they feel disconnected from, yearning for a better life commensurate with the better version of themselves they hazily wish to become. Although Moshfegh’s novel is set in the portentous fall of the year 2000 counting down to September 11, 2001, it is a 9/11 novel only by apophasis, studiously avoiding mentioning what the reader already knows, and refusing any sentimental identification with the apocalyptic event of 9/11, rejecting being “defined” by it, individually or generationally, but recognizing the beauty and fragility of individual lives in the novel’s final passage. It shares this avoidance of making 9/11 the central reference point with Catherine Lacey’s *The Answers*, which glancingly mentions it in connection with a narcissistic character, illustrating the tendency of more recent American fiction to eschew generational labels defined by relation to epochal events or national narratives, but instead value individuality and personal stories.

Indeed, a distinguishing feature of Millennial American fiction in the generational

sense, as delineated by authors born between the early 1980s and about 1995, are discussions around the lack of a defining Millennial novel as there was for previous generations, even in the 1980s: Generation X had Bret Easton Ellis and generationally epitomizing novels like *Less than Zero* (1985) and *American Psycho* (1991). Earlier generations – such as the Lost Generation of the 1920s, or Beats of the 1950s – wrote fiction defined by world wars in a way that 9/11 has failed to individuate the Millennial generation or Gen Z.

The 9/11 novels of the first two decades of the 2000s are in fact by Boomers, or even “Silent Generation” authors such as Thomas Pynchon, whose novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013) weaves together the Y2K apocalypse and 9/11, and Don DeLillo, whose *Underworld* (1997) is historical fiction concerned with “last things” among other themes, and whose *Falling Man* (2007) is usually on the list of 9/11 fiction, who share with other writers of their generation like Philip Roth (*The Plot Against America* [2004]; *The Human Stain* [2000], about identity politics in 1990s America) an interest in explorations of American nationality and history in larger contexts of globalization. Indeed, rather than Thomas Pynchon’s more overtly thematic 9/11 novel, *Bleeding Edge*, it may be the more oblique treatment of 9/11 utilizing genre conventions of pulp Weird Fiction in his earlier novel, *Against the Day* (2006), from which a line can be traced to the more contemporary writing by Millennial authors and its use of pulp genres. While writing by earlier generations such as the Silent Generation that lived through World War II or the Boomer generation that followed it was concerned with the attempt to define national culture and was historiographic in its effort to identify the uniquely defining characteristics of particular periods of American history, writing by Millennial authors seems rather to move beyond generational or ethnic categories, almost as if, with

Gen Z, a limit has indeed been reached exhausting the usefulness of generationally or ethnically identifying labels, along with letters of the alphabet.

SEE ALSO: Border Fictions; Fictions of Work and Labor; Globalization; Indigenous Narratives; Periodization; Post-9/11 Narratives; Young Adult Boom

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