

The 1930s v the 2010s

## The lessons of “Keep the Aspidistra Flying” for millennials

*George Orwell’s novel from 1936 has plenty to say about austerity and “selling out”*



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WE have become accustomed to hearing how prescient “Nineteen Eighty-Four” (1949) feels in today’s political climate. Others point out echoes of “Animal Farm” (1945) in modern political rhetoric. But one of George Orwell’s lesser-known works also enjoys renewed relevance: “Keep the Aspidistra Flying” (1936)—a novel he was thoroughly dissatisfied with—captures the financial bind in which many millennials find themselves.

Frequently stereotyped as profligate and entitled—think of Tim Gurner’s “avocado toast” tirade (<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/15/australian-millionaire-millennials-avocado-toast-house>)—research conducted by Standard and Poor’s, a market intelligence firm, shows that millennials are in fact [as thrifty and risk averse](http://fortune.com/2015/04/29/why-millennials-and-the-depression-era-generation-are-more-similar-than-you-think/) (<http://fortune.com/2015/04/29/why-millennials-and-the-depression-era-generation-are-more-similar-than-you-think/>) as the generation that came of age in the 1930s. They too grew up amid economic upheaval and austerity. They are willing to accept lower salaries, work longer hours and at jobs for which they are grossly over-qualified. Beth Kobliner, author of “Get a Financial Life: Personal Finance in Your Twenties and Thirties”, describes it as “a great depression mentality” (<http://www.marketwatch.com/story/5-ways-millennials-have-it-harder-than-their-parents-did-when-it-comes-to-money-2017-04-05>).

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That is the generation to which Gordon Comstock, the protagonist of “Keep the Aspidistra Flying” belongs. He makes the decision to defy the odds, to rebel against “the money god” and follow his dream of writing poetry. Resigning from what he contemptuously describes as “a good job” in advertising (“the dirtiest ramp that

capitalism has yet produced”), Comstock finds a job in a book shop and is forced to make do with two pounds a week—about £130 today. “Perhaps it sounds rather fun if you are right and sought-after,” he says bitterly, “but how different it is when you do it from necessity!”

Admittedly, falling off the ladder in Comstock’s time was disastrous. Lacking well-off relatives, his only source of potential financial backup is his wealthy friend Ravelston. Unemployment benefit was minimal and ended after six months; the National Health Service (NHS) was not yet established, making health care another expense. Millennials, however, face myriad other financial pressures that ensure budgets are stretched. A university degree remains necessary to secure “a good job”, and brings with it an average debt of £44,000. Buying a house remains extremely difficult without substantial parental assistance.

Rosemary, Comstock’s girlfriend, is more of a realist when it comes to money. She is prepared to remain at the advertising firm even though she considers it a “beastly office”, and refuses to start a family in straitened circumstances. It is an unwillingness mirrored by millennials: in 2013, the average age for British mothers reached 30 [for the first time ever](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/liveb10-16)

(<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/liveb10-16>). “We can’t afford principles, people like us,” Rosemary says. “*That’s* what Gordon doesn’t seem to understand.”

Even when Comstock does understand, he refuses to care, preferring to live in squalor so long as he can “breathe free air, free of the money-stink”. He ends up in a bedsit claiming to want to “cut the strings of his self-respect, to submerge himself—to *sink*” into “that great sluttish underworld where failure and success have no meaning”.

It is only when Rosemary falls pregnant and is about to “go home to father and mother” that Comstock relents and takes back his old job. This is not “The Road to Wigan Pier” (1937) or “Down and Out in Paris and London” (1933), Orwell’s chronicles of the lives of the working classes and underclass. By dint of his education, Comstock can avoid real oblivion, but just as an entire generation of millennials are learning, he has to let go of his delusions and accept that he is never going to make a living writing poetry. His suicidal blasphemy against “the money code” has “brought him only misery”. “Everyone sooner or later surrenders,” he concludes.

The reader could be forgiven for believing that “Keep the Aspidistra Flying” has a happy ending; in the last scene Comstock is contentedly listening to the baby moving inside Rosemary’s stomach. The problem is that the reader has been subject to his tirades against middle class morality for most of the book and so the ending feels less like a comforting bourgeois resolution and more like the final chapter of “Nineteen Eighty-Four” wherein Winston Smith’s covert rebellion is transmuted into acceptance of and loyalty to The Party. “In some corner of his mind,” Comstock decides, “he had always known that this would happen...for it was what, in his secret heart, he had desired.” In this way, “Keep the Aspidistra Flying” foreshadows the dilemma that befalls today’s millennials. With so little room for manoeuvre and such high penalties for non-compliance, their quiet conformity belies a devastating loss of freedom, a crushing of the spirit that only their great-grandparents could relate to.

