

Are you born lucky?

How your era defines you

The generation we were born in shapes us more than we realise. Hannah Borno finds out why

Photographs by **Richard Cannon**

Katie, 37, a copy editor, is on her tenth job and third career. Addicted to travel, scared to settle, she feels as if her life is built on shifting sands. 'Ever since I was young I can remember feeling as if I were on the outside looking in – when I was smaller, and my parents were having problems, and later when I tried to find a career. My mum would nag me to get a job for life. She could never understand that even if I could get one, it was something I didn't want. No company is going to look after you anyway. The only person who's going to take care of you is yourself.'

Katie is a typical member of the cynical, adaptable and marginalised generation dubbed Generation X. Life couldn't be more different for Katie's cousin Sophie, 21, a student. Sophie lives at home, preferring to go to college nearby so she can carry on living with her family. She's actively involved in environmental causes – organising

a green volunteer taskforce via a Facebook group (400 friends and counting). She is a member of the Millennial generation.

Although we intuitively sense that there's a different psychology to each generation – our own perspective is never going to be the same as our mother's, or our daughter's – we've never quite known exactly how it works and why this is the case. But a revolutionary theory,

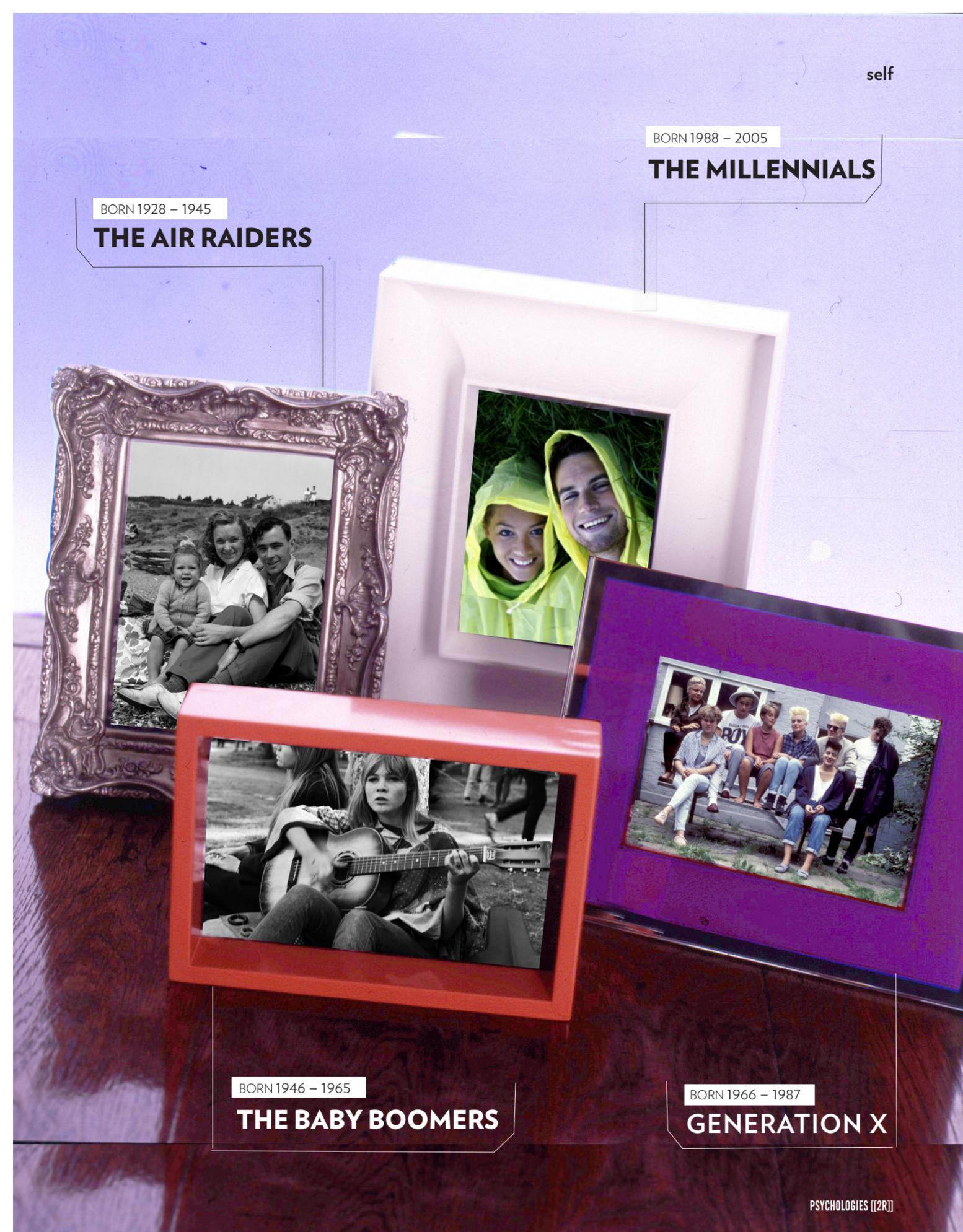
'We tend to have opposing world views to previous generations'

developed by social historians William Strauss and Neil Howe, suggests that when we are born shapes our sense of identity and world view as much as personal background or circumstances.

Howe and Strauss, co-authors of *The Fourth Turning* (Broadway), have

identified four generation types, which follow each other in an ever-repeating cycle of approximately 100 years. Our current historical cycle began just after World War II, in 1946. Its archetypes are the Air Raid Generation (born between 1928 and 1945), who came of age at the start of this era, followed by the Baby Boomers (1946 to 1965), then Generation X (1966 to 1987) and, finally, the Millennials (1988 to 2005).

We tend to have opposing world views from the generation that is one removed from us. 'These function as our shadow generation,' says Howe. Which is why Katie finds herself so magnificently at odds with her parents, who were born in the early 1940s – an obedient generation who saw it as their duty to help their older brothers and sisters build post-war Britain. Katie's mother's inability to understand her daughter's aversion to a corporate job is typical. Air Raiders have done well for themselves by trusting the establishment and cannot understand their children's



BORN 1928 – 1945
THE AIR RAIDERS

BORN 1988 – 2005
THE MILLENNIALS

BORN 1946 – 1965
THE BABY BOOMERS

BORN 1966 – 1987
GENERATION X

What's your archetype?

Neil Howe describes the four generation types

➔ cynicism. Katie, born in the early Seventies, is Generation X – individualistic and politically apathetic with little faith in 'the system'.

Meanwhile, Katie's aunt, born in 1949, is a typical Boomer. In her youth she was keen to oppose the establishment as loudly as possible. As a student in London she quickly found her political voice by taking part in the first ever student sit-in.

While Millennials, such as Katie's cousin Sophie, and Boomers have strong, unshakeable ideals – for and against the establishment respectively – Gen X-ers such as Katie just want to get by in life.

Parenting styles are influenced by the era we are born in

As important as the time we come of age is the way the previous generation brought us up. Each generation's values are shaped by the way it was parented, but parenting styles in turn are influenced by our time. Generational theory reveals how society repeatedly oscillates between over- and under-protection of its children.

As society was rebuilding itself after the war, its instinct was to nurture its children, but as time passed the agenda changed. From the late Sixties to the mid-Eighties, it focused on the adults, and contemporary politics was dominated in turn by civil rights, gay rights, feminism and nuclear proliferation. But as these issues moved on, the shift returned to the needs of the child. Since the Nineties we have worried most about ➔

THE AIR RAIDERS

BORN 1928 – 1945



They grow up as overprotected children during a crisis, come of age as sensitive young adults and become indecisive mid-life leaders before ageing into empathic elders (the next wave of Air Raiders are now being born, from 2006 onwards). As young children they are obedient and diligent. They help build the new civic order and are risk-averse. They have high levels of institutional trust and tie themselves to the system as a ticket for success. This strategy has served them well and they have an extraordinary record of upward economic mobility. In midlife they start to take more risks and during the Sixties and Seventies they spearheaded the divorce revolution.

ADVICE: You will most likely view the coming crisis as a tragedy, which brings back anxious childhood memories. Instead of grieving and being fearful try to see that this coming crisis is vital. Your children and grandchildren have different needs from you, and this crisis will eventually ensure those needs are met.

TYPICAL AIR RAIDER: A member of the Young Conservatives and jobs at the Electricity Board and the bank, John Major was prime minister for seven years but regarded as a weak leader. However, a new side of him was revealed when he admitted to having an affair with Edwina Currie during his time at Number 10.

➔ MMR vaccines, childhood obesity and, most recently, child protection.

This is why Gen X-ers, born when children were at their least cosseted, had the toughest upbringings of all. As they were being born and growing up, contemporary blockbusters included *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), which reflected the mood of the time and portrayed children as unwanted, possessed by destructive and demonic forces. A decade later, when the cherished Millennials started to emerge, society's shift back to protecting the child is similarly reflected in the culture. Films such as *Baby Boom* (1987) and *Three Men And A Baby* (1987) celebrated parenthood and the positive, transformational effect children had on adults. Hyper-anxious 'Baby On Board' signs were suddenly on every car, and child safety and protection became a serious concern again.

RENEWING SOCIETY

A key insight of Strauss and Howes' theory is that at the end of a whole cycle of archetypes, there is a natural period of transition where the whole cycle begins again. We are now in a time of challenge, deprivation and upheaval. 'But we shouldn't be too negative about this period of crisis,' says Howe. 'Like winter, it serves a purpose. Everything withers and falls back so that something new can grow.' As current social infrastructures collapse or change, new and better ones will be built, and after a jarring period of readjustment, society will be ultimately transformed and renewed. Every generation has a part to play in this process (see right, and overleaf). ➔



THE BABY BOOMERS

BORN 1946 – 1965



Growing up as indulged post-crisis children, they come of age as narcissistic and outspoken young crusaders rebelling against the institutional blueprint of their parents. The most creative of all the generations, they are original, idealistic and values-driven – their voice is loud and they demand that others respond to it. However, during this current crisis, Boomers are not doing well financially and as their affluence wanes they turn to spirituality en masse, ready to take on their next role of wise elders during the crisis.

ADVICE: Now the ideals and values you crusaded for in the 1960s and '70s will finally be manifested in real institutional change. Know that over the next 20 years you will be called on to provide moral guidance, vision and leadership for the young, who respond with an eagerness that will delight you.

TYPICAL BABY BOOMER: Tony Blair was an activist and band member in his youth and as he enters his autumn years he appears to be returning to a more spiritual path, converting to Catholicism and setting up a faith foundation.



GENERATION X
BORN 1966 - 1987

They grew up underprotected during a time when the needs of adults, not children, were paramount. As children, many felt marginalised and as alienated young adults they are initially the most cynical, individualistic, and splintered culture of the generations. They are politically apathetic, distrust the system and are driven to take personal risk. As they age they slow down, becoming protective parents and are increasingly risk-averse. Resilient, resourceful and tolerant of uncertainty, they blossom in a crisis and forge the communities needed to survive.

ADVICE: Your generation never felt useful or crucial but now your time has come. You will now be at the forefront of society, the leaders during this crisis and the generation that is most energised by it. History will be revolving around you as you become the leaders of a society looking at you to save it.

TYPICAL GENERATION X-ER: Singer Alanis Morissette started as a child star but rejected her manufactured pop look and went on to define female angst for her generation with her bitter, angry and cynical lyrics.

Millennials grew up loved, protected and regarded as special (the last cohort was the Victory generation, born between 1903 and 1927). They are idealistic, but confident in and very trusting of public institutions. Ultra-community minded, they are keen to live at home or near their parents. They come of age during the crisis and work hard to rebuild a shattered society. With a collective energy, optimism and institutional power, they can do things that other midlife generations cannot. They spend their midlife in the affluent society they've created, but experience cultural and social turmoil in old age.

ADVICE: Coming changes are afoot and huge problems are about to be solved to create a better world. Know that you'll be called upon to make sacrifices and provide labour to build society anew.

TYPICAL MEMBER: Model Lily Cole, born in 1988, is the face of Marks & Spencer, is studying politics at Cambridge and is already revealing some eco sensibilities. She recently wrote the foreword for a new book on green shopping, 'Green Is The New Black' (Hodder & Stoughton).

Find out more: Visit Neil Howe's website lifecourse.com for more on generational theory. ■



THE MILLENNIALS
BORN 1988 - 2005