

Preface

When we began writing our first book together, *Generations*, in the mid-'80s, not many people in any business looked at their products and markets through a generational lens. Among the few who did were pioneers in the popular culture—from director John Hughes to the creators of MTV and BET. In the years since, though, especially after the “discovery” of Generation X in the early '90s, nearly everyone looks at markets that way, in fashion, cosmetics, cars, colleges, the military, you-name-it.

Through the history of youth pop culture, people in that business have made earnest efforts to figure out what's going on in young minds. Usually, they get it right—as in, for example, the late '80s and '90s. The accelerated pace, technological edge, and brassy attitude of popular entertainment effectively served the young people then coming of age. But every two decades or so—when a new generation reaches college age—many of them get it wrong. This is nothing new. It happened in the early '60s, again in the early '80s, and it's happening again now.

Once you start looking at anything—including the pop culture—through the lens of generational change, the pieces start fitting together. Consider, for example, how the first stirrings of the modern pop culture arose among the men and women of a large and indulged postwar generation. We don't mean Boomers—no, we're referring to the “Missionary” generation of W.C. Handy and Scott Joplin (and Jane Addams, FDR, and Albert Einstein). Born after the Civil War, they came of age just as the “frontier” was declared over. The homesteads were gone, the west explored. Instead, many young people turned their attention to popularizing a culture, pulling together some late-nineteenth century threads. What came of it? Ragtime. The blues. Jazz. Tin

pan alley. The *original* nickelodeon. And, in time, the first films, movie stars, and radio stations.

Since then, five more generations have had a major hand in the evolution of pop, from the famous “Lost Generation” to Generation X, each with its own cadre of stars, writers, directors, and producers. Initially, they targeted their cultural products to people their own age. Then, as they matured, they had to target a new generation younger than themselves. Always, those younger generations set new trends. Some culture creators rode those trends—and prospered. Others stuck with the old formulas—and did not.

Today, we’re seeing the emergence of the seventh generation of pop: Millennials. Here again, some will catch the new youth trends and prosper, and others will not. Since 1997, when Millennial middle schoolers triggered the music industry’s tumble, the world of youth pop has moved to a newly uncertain ground.

In entertainment, and other fields, generational change does not come easily, given all the creative teams in place, products in the pipeline, and brand images wrapped around well-established concepts. Breaking out is hard.

In assembling examples, and crafting some of the “hands on” suggestions, especially in the realm of interactive entertainments, we’ve had the active help of Pete Markiewicz, whose company (Indiespace) has ridden the wave of the Internet revolution and Gen-X culture, marketing the works of fledgling artists, pioneering online music sales, and publishing extraordinarily perceptive Web essays on generational change. We would also like to thank our colleague of many years, Rick Delano, for his advice and support, and Marc Waddell of Trademark Artists Management for his contributions to our discussions about the Internet. And we thank Victoria Hays, Lis Libengood, and Spark Media Group for their help with the cover design, page layout, proofreading, and many other details involved in publishing this book.

We know the world of collegians, teens, and ‘tweens through nearly two decades of joint research, dating back to our earliest work on the book *Generations*, which we started writing when the first Millennials were in preschool. (That’s when we first affixed that name to these children, who

now are in their twenties.) We've been following their trend lines—and, just as important, tracing their place in history—ever since.

Once you look at today's generations from a cultural (and business) perspective, you may find them interesting in their fuller historical context, which we described in our prior books. *Generations* (1991) is the full history of America from the first New World settlers forward, told as a series of generational biographies. In *13th-Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (1993), we wrote a socio-biography of Generation X, published right around the time of its discovery by the media. *The Fourth Turning* (1997) applied our generational concepts to a larger theory about the seasonality of history, in America and elsewhere.

Millennials Rising (2000) is our book about the younger generation, which we afterwards supplemented with *Millennials Go to College* (2003) and a Millennials handbook we recently wrote for the U.S. Armed Forces recruiting command. We recommend *Generations* and *The Fourth Turning* to readers who wish to learn more about our methodology, and *Millennials Rising* and *Millennials Go to College* for those seeking further perspectives on the young people we describe in this volume.

Our foray into the popular culture, with this generation, seemed a natural consequence of Strauss's nearly quarter-century as a theater director and performing artist, as cofounder of the Capitol Steps (www.capitolsteps.com). Over the last six years, Strauss has combined these two interests by collaborating with some very fine theater teachers to launch The Cappies (www.cappies.com) a nationwide program through which teenagers are trained as theater critics, after which they attend and review each others' shows, and then become the voting judges for "Cappie" awards presented at Cappies Galas.

We each have Millennial children, two school-age Howes (11 and 13, at this writing), and two young-adult Strausses (21 and 22). Strauss also has two grown Gen-X children (24 and 28).

Whether our reader has children or not, we encourage you to start this book by asking: What teenagers do you know personally? What are they and their friends like? If they were given the time and resources, and left to their own creative devices, what kind of entertainment would they create?

Would they want something different, something more barrier-testing, or (just as provocatively) something *less* that way from their entertainment? We'll lay odds that whatever this "something" will be, it won't be what you often see in today's movies or TV shows, or hear about in songs. That's the problem, in a nutshell.

Every generation has some people who set trends, others who follow, and others who resist. In combination, all a generation's members lend it a unique cultural flavor. Each generation is historically necessary, as a corrective to the ones who came before. Each has strong and weak points, unique perceptions and blind spots, forces for progress and reaction. This has been true for Boomers and Gen Xers, and will surely be true for Millennials.

Our object is not to judge, but to understand. There is no such thing as a "good" or "bad" generation. Every generation in American history is or was what it had to be—and, in the end, each one has turned out to be what America needed at the time. We expect the same will be true of Millennials. Something new is arriving with today's rising generation. We ask our reader first to accept that, and then to apply whatever meaning you wish to it. We share the view of the great German scholar Leopold von Ranke, who wrote that "all the generations of humanity appear equally justified." In "any generation," he wrote, "real moral greatness is the same as in any other."

We invite you to share any comments with us, by email, via authors@lifecourse.com.

— Neil Howe and William Strauss