

Dystopian Fiction: A Literary Outlet for Teen Angst

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Mandatory government-sponsored cosmetic surgery for teenagers? A lottery-style draft to select children to fight to the death on live television? A televised “Bachelor”-style contest to select the next queen? What in the world are our “tweens,” teens, and young adults reading? The answer is dystopian literature and it is rapidly taking over the young adult genre.

What is Dystopian Literature?

Dystopian literature refers to the genre of books about unpleasant or repressed societies, often propagandized as being utopian. This wildly popular young adult genre may feature some common elements:

- The society is an illusion or caricature of a perfect world
- Propaganda (misleading promotion or advertising) is used to control citizens of the society
- The society requires conformity (uniform rules, styles, and customs)
- Information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted for general population of citizens
- Citizens are perceived as being under constant surveillance by the government or those of power/privilege
- Citizens have a fear of — or no access to — the outside world
- Young, rebellious protagonist who questions authority and challenges the power structure
- An eventual uprising to establish justice for citizens

Some familiar, popular, or classic examples of dystopian literature include:

- *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (first published in 1945)
- *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth (first published in 2011)
- *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (first published in 1950)
- *The Giver* series by Lois Lowry (first published in 1993)
- *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins (first published in 2008)
- *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (first published in 1954)
- *Uglies* series by Scott Westerfeld (first published in 2005)

Dystopian literature is often adapted to film, which increases the genre’s popularity and audience base. Book-themed merchandise is prevalent, from “Mockingjay” pins to “Divergent” T-shirts. Even baby name websites indicate that the names of many dystopian protagonists are rapidly gaining popularity among new parents (“Katniss” or “Four” for your new baby?).

What is the Appeal for Gifted Teenage Readers?

With so many books to choose from, why are these dystopian young adult novels flying off the

shelves? To figure it out, we need to provide a bit of context about the readers.

Lovecky (1992) describes five social-emotional traits of giftedness:

- **Divergent thinking ability** – Preference for unusual, original, or creative aspects of any topic
- **Excitability** – High energy and emotional reactivity
- **Sensitivity** – Compassion for people and social causes and passion evidenced by intense commitment to people and ideas
- **Perceptiveness** – Intuition, insight, and a need for truth
- **Entelechy** – Inner strength and a need for self-determination

These traits of giftedness combined with general characteristics of teenagers (identity-seeking, adventurous, risk-taking, emotionally driven, etc.) prime this group of readers to relate and respond to the characters and content of dystopian fiction. Gifted teen readers tend to identify with young, talented, strong-willed, independent protagonists who are able to overcome obstacles in the face of nearly impossible odds. Additionally, dystopian fiction often shines a spotlight on social injustices and other ethical issues which are irresistible to teens craving a safe outlet for thrill and controversy.

Sarner (2013) also points out that “the allure of fiction has always had roots in escapism.” When we need a break from reality, sometimes it is refreshing to escape to a fictional society darker than our own, rather than one of rosy idealism. Nothing makes a person appreciate their own lives more than the realization that it could actually be worse. When teens feel their most powerless in real life (self-conscious, confused, lost, bullied, stressed out, etc.), walking in the shoes of a more powerful version of themselves can be extremely appealing... and therapeutic.

What are the Instructional Implications?

For classroom teachers trying to motivate students, dystopian literature can be an effective “hook” (and not just in English class). History students can make comparisons to historical events or societal patterns. Physics students can test the plausibility of events in the novels. Math students can recreate the settings in three-dimensions using geometry. The interdisciplinary connections are limitless! A quick internet search of lesson plans using dystopian novels will yield multiple ideas for embedding these novels into your curriculum and instruction.

Dr. Sandra Kaplan’s prompts of depth and complexity can also be used to examine dystopian literature or make real-life connections:

- Why is this literature **trend** popular among young readers?
- What **patterns** emerge in this genre?
- What types of **rules** govern dystopian societies?
- What **ethical issues** are explored in dystopian novels?
- Ponder the **unanswered question**: Can utopia ever exist on earth? Justify your

response with evidence.

A Few Considerations When Selecting Books

If you are now convinced to try dabbling in dystopian literature, just be aware that not all dystopian novels are created equal. As hundreds of new authors exploit the dystopian trend and jump on the potential money-making bandwagon, we as readers must be discerning consumers. While most dystopian novels have a clever premise or likeable protagonist, that is not enough to sustain a reader's attention to the end of a book. A clever idea does not guarantee that the writing is cohesive, stylistic, or that the fictional society, characters, or plot are well-developed.

On the other hand, don't discount novels that seem too over the top (yes, a surgery to go from "ugly" to "pretty" at the age of 16 sounds farfetched...) – these may turn out to be favorites for you or your teenage readers. Read reviews, ask for recommendations from friends or experts, or pre-read books when supporting your child or student in making a selection. Consider the maturity level of the reader (just because they *can* read it, doesn't necessarily mean they *should* read it), and remember that the content of most dystopian literature is intended for teen or young adult audiences. Additionally, don't assume that seeing the film adaptation is enough. As the saying goes, "The book is much better."

Conclusion

Ask parents or teachers and they will probably be able to provide anecdotes about their children (bibliophiles and reluctant readers alike) and their excitement about dystopian literature.

For example, Noe, 12, devoured the entire *Hunger Games* trilogy, secretly imagining herself to be the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen. When she finished reading the books, she read them all again. *And again*. This inspired her entire family – from her 34-year-old lawyer uncle to her 69-year-old retired grandfather to read (and love) the series. She even taught her two year-old cousin the lyrics to a song the protagonist sang to her sister in the book, which the two cousins happily performed for the entire family. A seemingly dark tale of a dystopian society actually worked to bring a multi-generational family together – now that's a literary phenomenon worth sharing!

References

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