



Mixed reviews - Why are dystopian novels so popular?

Four commentators discuss the role and value of dystopian fiction

A. The dystopian novel is nothing new. But I doubt that George Orwell, Ray Bradbury or Suzanne Collins imagined that their respective works *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Hunger Games* would still be so popular years after they were first published. Even more remarkable is how this genre has suddenly come to crowd the young-adult shelves of local bookshops – and I suspect that this will be the case for many years to come. This is because, unlike the older dystopian ‘classics’, in much of the new fiction teenage protagonists drive the narrative. Furthermore, although the concepts of friendship, broken trust and defying authority feature in other types of novel, at the heart of any dystopian story is an uprising against the status quo. This is of particular interest to teens, since they are at an age when they are becoming increasingly cynical about society. Several years ago I remember overhearing a couple who had clashed with their son over his reading choices – *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series. ‘How are we going to persuade him to read something more positive?’, they fretted. I suspect their attitude only served to reinforce his view that ‘adults don’t get it’.

B. Film adaptations of modern authors’ dystopian novels have lately given the impression that all it takes to overthrow a totalitarian state are cartoonish superpowers and some smart one-liners, and I imagine that we aren’t likely to see a change here. But in the novels themselves, many of the main characters have considerably greater depth and the narrative is often written from the hero or heroine’s perspective, giving the reader access to their inner thoughts and the memories that haunt them. As the plot unfolds, we come to understand why they might choose to collaborate with the enemy, betray a friend, fall in love with the wrong person or sacrifice their own freedom to facilitate the process of revolution. Then there is the fact that young adults can often see their own lives mirrored in fantasy worlds where everyone is expected to conform – which might explain why dystopian works hold such great fascination for this particular age group. This is not to say that dystopian novels are all doom and gloom; if readers look carefully enough, even in the darkest story, the author has left a candle burning. There is a message that while human civilisation may be on the verge of collapsing, humans themselves will survive.

C. In the past, whenever I was asked to speak at a literary festival, questions from the audience were predictable. They were invariably about the individuals that populated my dystopian novels and whether or not I thought they were role models. But at last year's festival, I knew the questions were going to be different. When I was writing back in the 90s, I felt I had a moral responsibility towards my young readers; I understood their urge to question rules and social norms, to stand out rather than fit in. Dystopian stories reflect that urge more so than any other kind of novel. At the same time, they offer a glimmer of hope – faint, but within reach. A few years ago, however, I felt my responsibility shifting. Rather than writing about dark futures, I wanted to focus on the very real present, and not everyone in the festival audience praised my change in direction. Perhaps it all felt too close, too possible? But I have no doubt that teens will always seek out dystopian fiction, and judging by the standard of writing at this year's festival, we're going to see many first-time authors make a name for themselves. Rather than offer advice, I think I'll leave them to it. After all, everyone's personal vision of dystopia is unique.

D. *The New York Times* Young Adult Fiction bestsellers list comes out next month, and we're bound to see at least one novel set in a dystopian future. Since the well-deserved success of the *Chaos Walking* trilogy by Patrick Ness and the award-winning *Station Eleven* by Emily St John Mandel, a great many first-time authors have been trying their hand at creating increasingly bleak scenarios for the near and distant future. But this trend can only last so long: at some point, young readers will realise they are encountering the same old plot with a slight variation in scenery. Dystopian authors have long assumed that their work resonates with teenagers because of the rebellion factor, but as with all works of young-adult fiction, it simply comes down to an exciting storyline. Any book – whether set in the past, present or future – has to be gripping and in this respect, Ness and Mandel are experts. They also know how to make us *care*; unfortunately, a large number of their contemporaries do not. Presenting people as 'good guys' and 'bad guys' undermines any confidence that they are real. Teens want to read about characters that are complex like themselves.