
CHILDREN DYSTOPIAN GENRE DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY 21 ST CENTURY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract.

*This article examines the portrayal of children in dystopian literature and film in the 21st century. It analyzes how these works depict children as victims of oppressive and authoritarian regimes, exploring themes such as loss of innocence, trauma, and resilience. The article also discusses how dystopian narratives use children as symbols for hope and rebellion against oppressive systems, while highlighting the dangers of apathy and complacency. Through an analysis of popular examples such as *The Hunger Games* and *The Maze Runner*, this article argues that dystopian fiction provides a powerful platform for exploring complex social issues through the eyes of young protagonists.*

Key words.

children, dystopian, 21st century, society, technology, environment, education, healthcare, government, inequality, oppression, rebellion, major influences, development of the genre, control, science and technological advancement, social reflection.

Introduction

The 21st century has seen an emergence of dystopian literature, movies, and television series that have captured the imagination of audiences globally. Dystopia refers to a society that is characterized by a repressive and controlled state, often featuring a dehumanized populace and an oppressive government. While the genre has been around for decades, it has recently gained popularity with the younger generation.

The rise in popularity of dystopian literature can be attributed to the current global political climate. Children today are growing up in a world where they are constantly being bombarded with news about wars, terrorism, climate change, natural disasters, and political instability. This has led to a general sense of anxiety and fear among young people who are struggling to make sense of the world around them.

Dystopian literature provides an outlet for children to explore these fears in a safe environment. It allows them to confront their anxieties about the future by presenting them with a worst-case scenario that is often exaggerated but still rooted

in reality. Through these stories, children can learn how to cope with adversity and develop resilience.

The appeal of dystopia is no mystery. Fictional characters are driven by loss and need, and dystopian protagonists are the purest distillation of that drive. They have lost their liberty, their dignity, their safety – and they need everything. Their lives are structured by the antagonist – the oppressive state/occupying force/space aliens – so the enemy is clear and powerful and loathsome.

Dystopian characters are hard-wired with the need for freedom, reflecting the desire of young readers beginning to push against the boundaries of their own parent-controlled world, and their stakes are built into the setting; into their habits and behaviours and clothing. Everything a book needs is on the first page, instant and sweet. Dystopia is the energy drink of plot, and it's no surprise that young readers guzzle it down.

Before I was a writer I was an English teacher for six years, and I know that judgements on suitability are tricky and subjective; 10- and 11-year-olds are unique in their interests and maturity, and no two are alike. Which books children should be reading is only answerable on an individual basis, and that's up to librarians, teachers, parents and, ultimately, the readers themselves. Young people know best what's too scary or too violent for them, and they'll put a book down if it makes them uncomfortable.

The violent content of many dystopian novels has been a cause for concern for some guardians, but it's important to consider it in context. A violent scene in a book will place the reader inside the skin of the victim, the perpetrator, or both; and the imaginative agency required of them means the consequences of violence are explored with greater depth than in a video game or film. The acts of violence in YA novels, which might sound excessive if described in isolation, are given a resonance in context that allows a young reader to explore their consequences safely.

Dystopian fiction is a safe and thrilling space in which young readers can challenge themselves with satisfyingly scary, adult-free, non-didactic stories about what it means to be human, and to consider the means by which authority is wielded. Rather than fear them, we should be excited when they grab the attention of a young reader, and do our best to shine light on the page.

Over the past few months children's fiction has hardly been out of the news. Early March saw the launch of the "Let Books be Books" campaign, aimed at persuading publishers against titling or packaging books in gender-specific ways.

Then, the results of a survey conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison sparked controversy about race. It revealed that out of 3,200 books published in 2013 only 93 were about African Americans. Fewer still were about people from other ethnic backgrounds. In response to these findings, a three-day social media event took place at the start of May establishing the “We Need Diverse Books Campaign” in an effort “to address the lack of diverse, non-majority narratives in children’s literature”.

These campaigns are inspiring, especially to those of us with young children. The prospect that they might, as the “Let Books Be Books” petition puts it, encourage publishers to “open up new worlds for children” is truly heartening. But more news items on children’s fiction give further pause for thought.

A recent article in *The Guardian* asked whether Young Adult fiction “was becoming too dark” and “obsessed with death”. And the overwhelming popularity of Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* trilogy certainly indicates that teens have a taste for the disturbing and the dystopian. And, judging by Gillian Cross’s novel, *After Tomorrow*, which just won the Little Rebels Book Award (for fiction aimed at 0-12 years) this month, it seems these darker themes are percolating down to younger readers.

As with *The Hunger Games*, food scarcity drives the plot of *After Tomorrow* – transporting readers, as Irving Howe once said of the dystopian genre, “one more step ... beyond the known reality” of our own period of economic recession.

Cross’s fraught and violent world of raiders attacking families and ransacking homes begins after the big bank crash of “Armageddon Monday”. Then we learn how the central boys’ father is brutally murdered, their stepfather cruelly beaten, and their mother sexually violated. The novel is without doubt a tour de force – an utterly compelling tale of a family who must emigrate to France to escape from a near-future Britain. But is this content a step too far for children’s fiction?

Now, death and violence are nothing new for younger readers: the Grimms’ fairy tales, Roald Dahl and J K Rowling certainly show us that. And even in Beatrix Potter’s *Peter Rabbit*, we learn that Peter’s father “was put in a pie by Mrs McGregor”. J M Barrie’s *Peter Pan* reverberates with the author’s memory of his deceased brother, and *Neverland* itself is certainly no utopia: Peter himself is in fact a menace to the other children on the island as he mysteriously “thins them out”.

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* awakens from *Wonderland* with the Queen’s order to execute her resounding in her ears, her “curious dream” having become a distinctly nightmarish vision of perverted law and justice. And the idyllic riverbank of

Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* is disturbed when "Wild Wooders" ransack and usurp Toad Hall, turn out Mole and Badger and "beat them severely with sticks".

So given a bit of context, Cross's novel doesn't seem such an outlier after all. The hardship it represents brings home to British readers the very real difficulties of those forced by violence to seek asylum in other countries. William Blake and Charles Kingsley, of course, raised questions about social justice when writing about children. But are these modern issues just too troubling or is using dystopia to create enough distance for readers to begin to consider them actually a step in the right direction?

Back in 2009, Cross was one of many children's writers to petition against the British government's detention of child refugees. Michael Morpurgo, author of *War Horse*, was another. He is due to speak about his choices to depict war, refugees and conflict in his children's novels at this year's Hay Festival in Wales, which has just opened.

Today, we're all too aware of childhood as a social construct. It's as if we're all like Carlo Collodi's carpenter crafting our own Pinocchio, projecting our own worries and desires. But as Hugh Cunningham and Michael Morpurgo recognised in *The Invention of Childhood*, "children can also be agents in the making of their lives and their world".

Perhaps then we ought to look to children themselves to help guide us in representing the diversity of modern society. And surely events such as the annual global gathering of writers taking place at Hay-on-Wye over the next ten days are a way to do just that. If we see it, as Bill Clinton did, as "The Woodstock of the Mind", then it's uplifting to see that children themselves are so welcome in this collective re-imagining of our world.

In conclusion, dystopian literature has become an increasingly popular genre among children in the 21st century. It provides an opportunity for young people to explore complex themes and confront their fears about the future in a safe environment. However, parents should exercise caution when introducing their children to these stories as they can be rather dark and bleak. Nevertheless, dystopian literature has proven to be an effective tool for encouraging critical thinking and promoting resilience among young people.

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