

The appeal of dystopian novels for teens

By Thought Co., adapted by Newsela staff on 08.29.19

Word Count **621**

Level **850L**



Many dystopian novels have dark, dismal settings like the one above of a futuristic water tower looming over a cityscape. Image by: Grandfailure/iStock/Getty Image by: Grandfailure/iStock/Getty

Teens are loving the current popular literature of the dark, grim and dismal: the dystopian novel. The storylines are typically depressing. They contain leaders who terrorize citizens every year by making them watch teens fight to the death, or governments who support required operations to remove emotion. Those are just two plots from popular dystopian novels that teens are reading. But just what is a dystopian novel? How long has it been around? And there's the bigger question: Why is this type of novel so appealing to teens?

Definition

A dystopia is a society that is broken down, unpleasant or in an oppressed or terrorized state. It's the opposite of a utopia, which is a perfect world. When used in stories, dystopias reveal society's greatest fears. Totalitarian governments rule with complete power, disregarding the needs and wants of individuals. Classic examples of such governments can be found in "1984" by George Orwell and "Brave New World" by Aldous Huxley. Dystopian governments also ban activities that encourage individual thinking. The government's response to individual thinking in Ray Bradbury's classic, "Fahrenheit 451"? Burn the books!

History

Dystopian novels are not new to the reading public. Since the late 1890s, H.G. Wells, Ray Bradbury and George Orwell have entertained audiences with them. Their well-known books feature stories of Martians, book burnings and Big Brother, the ever-present Orwellian leader. Over the years, other dystopian books have given younger characters a more central role in dystopian settings. Examples include Nancy Farmer's "The House of the Scorpion" and Lois Lowry's Newbery-winning book "The Giver."

Since 2000, dystopian novels for teens have kept the dismal, dark setting. The nature of the characters has changed, though. They are no longer passive and powerless citizens. Instead, they are teens who are empowered, fearless, strong and determined. They find ways to survive and face their fears. Major characters have strong personalities that harsh governments attempt to control but cannot.

Consider the "Hunger Games," a popular dystopian series by Suzanne Collins. Katniss, a 16-year-old girl, is the series' main character and hero. She takes her sister's place in the annual event where teens from 12 different districts must fight to the death. Katniss commits a purposeful act of rebellion against the Capital. Her trials and triumphs keep readers on the edge of their seats.

There's also "Delirium" by Lauren Oliver. In this dystopian story the government teaches citizens that love is a dangerous disease that must be eradicated, meaning gotten rid of in humans. By age 18, everyone must undergo a required operation to remove the ability to feel love. Lena looks forward to the operation and fears love. Then she meets a boy and together they flee the government and find the truth.

"Divergent" by Veronica Roth is yet another favorite dystopian novel. In it, teens must unite with others based on their virtues. However, the main character learns she's divergent; she doesn't fit in a group. This makes her dangerous. She becomes a threat to the government and must keep secrets in order to protect her loved ones from harm.

Teen Appeal

So what do teens find so appealing about dystopian novels? First and foremost, rebellion. Teens in dystopian novels get to perform ultimate acts of rebellion against authority. What could be more appealing? Conquering a dismal future is empowering, especially when the teens have to rely on themselves without having to answer to parents, teachers or other authoritarian figures. Teen readers can certainly relate to those feelings.

Today's teen dystopian novels contain characters who exhibit strength, courage and conviction. Yes, there is death, war and violence, but it's not all negative. These characters defeat the negative forces. They are sending a hopeful message about the future.

Quiz

1 Read the following statements.

1. *Dystopian novels have been entertaining readers since the late 1890s.*
2. *Teens have become more interested in reading dystopian novels.*
3. *Dystopian novels are starting to have teens as the main characters.*
4. *Teens that are in dystopian novels sometimes learn about love and truth.*

Which two statements are MAIN ideas from the article?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 3 and 4

2 Read the paragraph from the article.

So what do teens find so appealing about dystopian novels? First and foremost, rebellion. Teens in dystopian novels get to perform ultimate acts of rebellion against authority. What could be more appealing? Conquering a dismal future is empowering, especially when the teens have to rely on themselves without having to answer to parents, teachers or other authoritarian figures. Teen readers can certainly relate to those feelings.

HOW does this paragraph support the MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) It describes a specific teen novel that has a dystopian world in it.
- (B) It highlights some reasons why teens enjoy reading dystopian novels.
- (C) It shows some problems that teens have with reading dystopian novels.
- (D) It explains how dystopian novels have changed throughout history.

3 Read the selection from the introduction [paragraph 1].

Teens are loving the current popular literature of the dark, grim and dismal: the dystopian novel. The storylines are typically depressing. They contain leaders who terrorize citizens every year by making them watch teens fight to the death, or governments who support required operations to remove emotion. Those are just two plots from popular dystopian novels that teens are reading.

Which word from the selection helps the reader understand the meaning of "dismal"?

- (A) current
- (B) popular
- (C) depressing
- (D) terrorize

Read the following selection from the section "Definition."

When used in stories, dystopias reveal society's greatest fears. Totalitarian governments rule with complete power, disregarding the needs and wants of individuals.

What is the meaning of the word "disregarding" as it is used in the selection above?

- (A) ignoring
- (B) supporting
- (C) angering
- (D) expanding