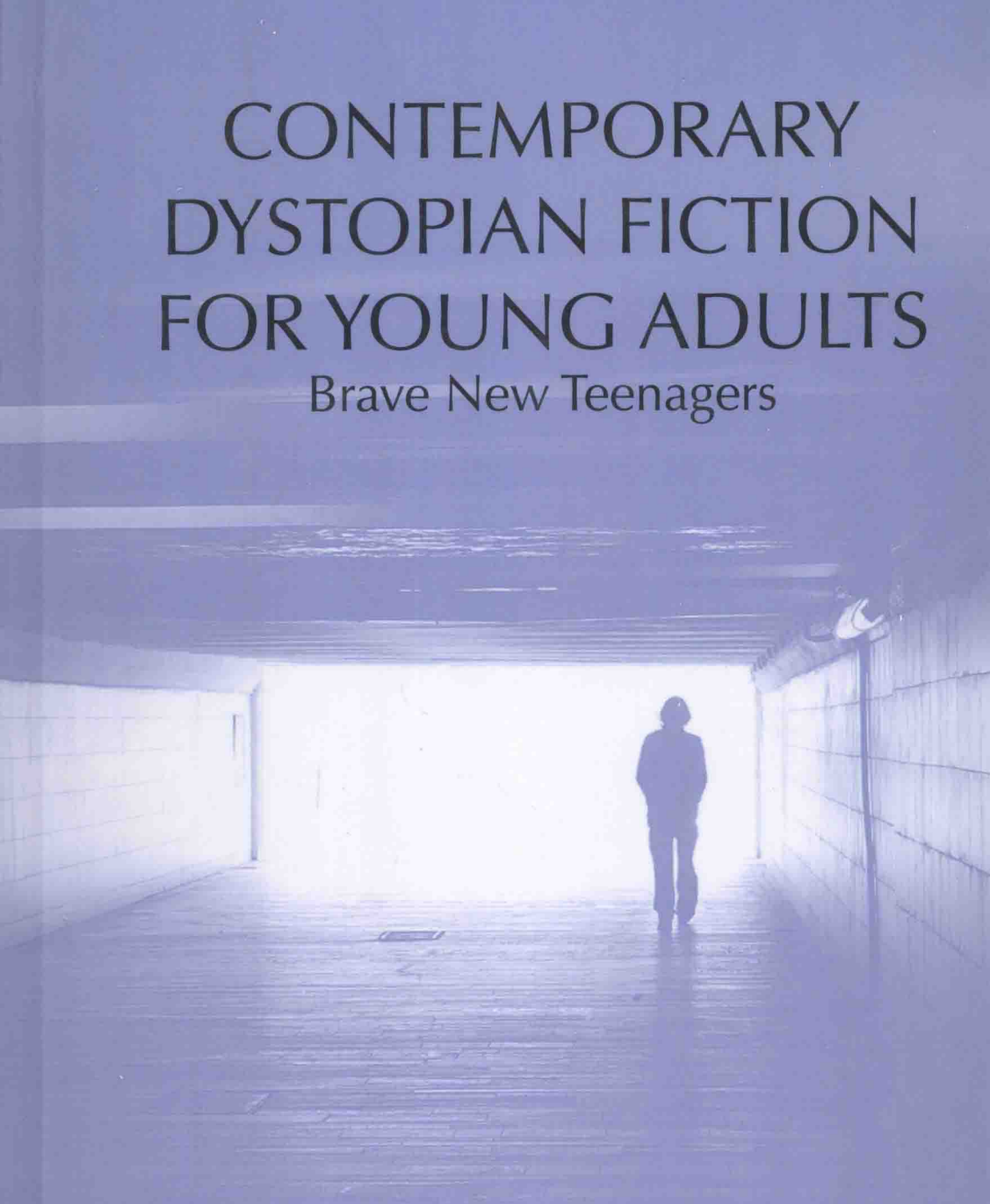
CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAN FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Brave New Teenagers



Edited by
Balaka Basu,
Katherine R. Broad, and
Carrie Hintz

ROUTLEDGE

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EDITED BY
BALAKA BASU,
KATHERINE R. BROADY,
AND CARRIE HINTZ

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CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAN FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

From the jaded, wired teenagers of M.T. Anderson's *Feed* to the spirited young rebels of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the protagonists of Young Adult dystopias are introducing a new generation of readers to the pleasures and challenges of dystopian imaginings. As the dark universes of YA dystopias continue to flood the market, *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* offers a critical evaluation of the literary and political potentials of this widespread publishing phenomenon. With its capacity to frighten and warn, dystopian writing powerfully engages with our pressing global concerns: liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity and justice, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self. When directed at young readers, these dystopian warnings are distilled into exciting adventures with gripping plots and accessible messages that may have the potential to motivate a generation on the cusp of adulthood. This collection enacts a lively debate about the goals and efficacy of YA dystopias, with three major areas of contention: do these texts reinscribe an old didacticism or offer an exciting new frontier in children's literature? Do their political critiques represent conservative or radical ideologies? And finally, are these novels high-minded attempts to educate the young or simply bids to cash in on a formula for commercial success? This collection represents a prismatic and evolving understanding of the genre, illuminating its relevance to children's literature and our wider culture.

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Series Editor's Foreword

The Children's Literature and Culture series is dedicated to promoting original research in children's literature, children's culture, and childhood studies. We use the term "children" in the broadest sense, spanning from earliest childhood up through adolescence. The already capacious term "culture" encompasses media (radio, film, television, video games, blogs, websites, social networking sites), material culture (toys, games, products), acculturation (processes of socialization), and of course literature, including all types of crossover works. Since children's literature is defined by its audience, this series seeks to foster scholarship on the full range of children's literature's many genres and subgenres: fairy tales, folk tales, comics, graphic novels, picture books, novels, poetry, didactic tales, nonsense, fantasy, realism, mystery, horror, fan fiction, and others.

Founded by Jack Zipes in 1994, Routledge's Children's Literature and Culture is the longest-running series devoted to the study of children's literature and culture from a national and international perspective. In 2011, expanding its focus to include childhood studies, the series also seeks to explore the legal, historical, and philosophical conditions of different childhoods. An advocate for scholarship from around the globe, the series recognizes innovation and encourages interdisciplinarity. In Zipes' words, "the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world."

Philip Nel

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Contents

Introduction

Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz

In 2008, the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* featured a piece titled "Scary New World" that took notice of a growing trend in the children's publishing marketplace: the recent explosion of dystopian fiction for young adults. The reviewer, young adult novelist John Green, began his article by remarking on the notable fertility of the field, saying, "The past year has seen the publication of more than a dozen postapocalyptic young adult novels that explore what the future could look like once our unsustainable lifestyles cease to be sustained. (Spoiler alert: It's gonna be bad)."[1] His review identified two particular texts to focus on: Susan Beth Pfeffer's *The Dead and the Gone* and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. The second of these, Collins's trilogy, neatly outstripped all of its competitors and ensured that its genre would be the latest publishing phenomenon in a post-Potter, post-*Twilight* market—a market which, having been surprised (once or twice) by the extraordinary success and market power that a YA franchise can offer, now always seems to be looking for the Next Big Thing. With the highly anticipated film release of *The Hunger Games* in 2012, YA dystopias have indisputably become just that, and have not yet been superseded.[2]

With its capacity to frighten and warn, dystopian writing engages with pressing global concerns: liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self. When directed at young readers, who are trying to understand the world and their place in it, these dystopian warnings are distilled into exciting adventures with gripping plots. Their narrative techniques often place us close to the action, with first-person narration, engaging dialogue, or even diary entries imparting accessible messages that may have the potential to motivate a generation on the cusp of adulthood.

Chris Crowe and Roberta Seelinger Trites outline a tradition of gritty YA novels popular with younger readers, beginning with texts such as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967).[3] Due to its apparent darkness, contemporary dystopian fiction for young adults may be read as part of this tradition, but this recent explosion of texts cannot be explained away as simply the natural progression of the YA genre. Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) was a popular dystopia for younger readers, but it wasn't until the 2000s that readers started to find a plethora of dystopias lining the bookshelves of the YA section, with titles like M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), Julie Bertagna's *Exodus* (2002), Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now* (2004), Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005), Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008), Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011), and many more. That readers "can't seem to get enough of fiction that suggests the future may be worse than the present" raises the question of why it holds such appeal.[4] As adult commentators begin to wonder whether YA fiction is "too dark" for their children to read,[5] these same children are diving deeper into the dystopian well, finding a sense of pleasure in texts that display an increasingly gloomy vision of the world they are to inherit.

Scholars as well as popular critics have remarked upon the genre's presence in the wider field of children's and young adult literature—and its overwhelming attraction for young audiences—but are just beginning to talk about the aesthetic qualities and political valences of these texts. *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* enters a lively debate about the goals and efficacy of YA dystopias, with three major areas of contention. First, how do these texts balance didacticism with pleasure? Second, do these texts espouse radical political change, or do their progressive exteriors mask an inner conservatism? And finally, do they offer their readers hope or despair? While YA books often unflinchingly engage with the problems of adolescents, they are nonetheless tied to the broader tradition of children's literature, which stresses hope. YA dystopias can uphold that tradition of optimism, embrace a more cynical vision, or oscillate between the two. All these questions underscore the negotiation between often conflicting literary influences, political ideologies, and intended audiences that these texts must undertake.

Forms of Dystopian Imagining

Dystopian fiction describes non-existent societies intended to be read as "considerably worse" than the reader's own.[6] Yet dystopia is a tensely vexed term. Orthographically speaking, it seems like it ought to be the reverse of a utopia, the non-existent society "considerably better" than the current world.[7] But instead, the dystopia often functions as a rhetorical *reductio ad absurdum* of a utopian philosophy, extending a utopia to its most extreme ends in order to caution against the destructive politics and culture of the author's present. It generally differs from the utopia in that its prescription is negative, rather

than positive: it tells us not how to build a better world, but how to perhaps avoid continuing to mess up the one we've got. Although more traditional dystopias such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) were largely "an extrapolation from the present that involved a warning,"[8] more recent examples, especially for young people, are expressly concerned with how to use this warning to create new possibilities for utopian hope within the space of the text.[9] The dystopian worlds are bleak not because they are meant to stand as mere cautionary tales, but because they are designed to display—in sharp relief—the possibility of utopian change even in the darkest of circumstances.

Each YA dystopia has its own aesthetic and political orientation; however, we can trace thematic threads in the genre that reflect how the central fears and concerns of the contemporary world are grafted onto a dystopian landscape. One major preoccupation of the dystopian imagination is the threat of environmental destruction. Novels like Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2009), Julie Bertagna's *Exodus* (2002) and *Zenith* (2007), and Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2010) envision the world as it has been damaged by global warming and other scenarios of ecological destruction. Rising sea levels, storms, drought, and the end of fossil fuels create social, political, and economic nightmares that sensitize readers to the dangers of environmental ruin at the same time that they depict young protagonists learning to adapt and survive in altered times.

The postapocalyptic dystopia can be distinguished from the environmental dystopia by its emphasis on a variety of other huge world-changing events, such as plague, World War III, cataclysmic asteroid crashes, or even zombies. These contemporary novels are prefigured by texts dating from the Cold War, such as Robert C. O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah* (1973) and Jean Ure's *Plague 99* (1989). In the twenty-first century, the production of postapocalyptic fiction seems if anything to have accelerated. Nuclear holocaust in Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* (2001), war in Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now* (2004), and the outbreak of an unexplained rash of zombies in Carrie Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (2009) all function to destroy civilization as it once stood, leaving small bands of survivors struggling to exist in a world forever changed. One result of the apocalyptic event is that it can turn existing communities into dystopias marked by secrecy, fear, and control, as those in power use violence and repression to maintain what little social structure remains.

Another major theme in YA dystopias is conformity, which is often exaggerated for dramatic effect. Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), for instance, presents a world of stifling "sameness" devoid of color, emotion, and memory, while her *Gathering Blue* (2000) depicts a society where artists are kept under strict social control. Often such conformist societies embrace their uniformity out of a fear that diversity breeds conflict. In Scott Westerfeld's Uglies series (2005–2007), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011), and Ally Condie's *Matched* (2011), government authorities have initiated strict policies to

manage personalities, choices, and appearances, ostensibly eliminating the discord said to threaten communal well being. As they depict the struggle between adolescent protagonists and oppressive governments, these novels attempt to tease out the appropriate balance between personal freedom and social harmony.

The YA dystopia's rigid and repressive regimes are often enforced through the enslavement and silencing of citizens, and several methods are used to achieve this. The escalating wars in Patrick Ness's Chaos Walking trilogy (2008–2010) are as much about physical enslavement as psychological control. *Little Brother*'s state-sponsored detentions and the implanted devices that audit and control people's thoughts in Elana Johnson's *Possession* (2011) demonstrate physical and mental imprisonment respectively, whereas Catherine Fisher's *Incarceron* (2007) and *Sapphique* (2008) feature both kinds of constraint. Other forms of enslavement—economic, affective, or technological—can be equally powerful. In Collins's *The Hunger Games*, the districts are kept in firm check by grinding poverty and near starvation, as well as by the ruthless show of power demonstrated when young tributes are forced to fight for the Capitol's amusement. Governments in *Uglies*, *Delirium*, and *Matched* rely on mind-altering surgeries and psychological tampering to maintain a predetermined and restricted life for each citizen. In each case, the protagonist's rebellion involves a bid for freedom from the enslaving forces of the dystopian regime, often representative of monolithic adult authority that has abrogated its responsibility to the young people it rules.

Additionally, YA dystopias are sensitive registers to the explosion of information that characterizes contemporary society, and to the atmosphere of conspiracy that pervades popular political discourse. Many novels feature an awakening, sudden or gradual, to the truth of what has really been going on. Jonas in *The Giver* learns that adults in his society can lie; Tally in *Uglies* discovers that the surgery that makes her friends pretty also damages their brains; Marcus in *Little Brother* uncovers the truth about his government's actions; and Titus in *Feed* comes to at least a transient awareness of the human costs of the profit motive. In books like *Delirium* and *Matched*, protagonists are often manipulated and lied to in order to keep society running smoothly, yet they eventually find out and rebel. Access to information is often dangerous, but is repeatedly presented as the only way to become free.

Whether they depict a postapocalyptic struggle for survival or a valiant attempt to retain individuality in a totalitarian world, YA dystopias are marked by their ambitious treatment of serious themes. Yet the far-fetched concepts they employ may create a buffer between reader and text, perhaps allowing them to be read ultimately as flights of fancy rather than projections of a possible future. However, their wildly fantastic premises may provide young people with an entry point into real-world problems,

encouraging them to think about social and political issues in new ways, or even for the first time.

Didacticism and Escape: The Complicated Allure of YA Dystopias

As YA dystopias engage with contemporary political and social questions, they revolve around two contrasting poles: education and escape. The novels simultaneously seek to teach serious lessons about the issues faced by humanity, and to offer readers a pleasurable retreat from their quotidian experience. Writing for young people tends to balance the desire to please and instruct, *dulce et utile*, and this tension is particularly marked in YA dystopias. With their prescriptive qualities and unveiled moral messages, YA dystopian writing can seem preachy and even old-fashioned. However edgy the covers of these novels may appear, with burned-out landscapes and hip warriors, the didacticism of their content is reminiscent of that of Victorian novels for children. One of the most beloved of these, Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1862–1863), combines what Louisa May Alcott described as "moral pap for the young" with fantastic or fairy tale settings and political commentary on pressing issues of the day, such as child labor: a mélange of ideas, methods, and agendas that would probably seem familiar to readers of YA dystopian fiction today.[10]

Perhaps one of the strongest sources of appeal for young adult dystopias, then, is the unequivocal clarity of their message. *The Hunger Games*, for instance, comments on a dominant culture wedded to violence and control and it makes that critique in an obvious way: by centering the plot of the trilogy on a giant reality TV arena. For Stephen King, "Reading *The Hunger Games* is as addictive (and as violently simple) as playing one of those shoot-it-if-it-moves videogames in the lobby of the local eightplex; you know it's not real, but you keep plugging in quarters anyway."[11] In a work like *Feed*, the targets are also abundantly clear: intellectual laziness, consumerism, and hedonistic youth culture. This blatant didacticism signals to readers the problems with society while offering something like a training manual on how to overcome the dilemma, reverse the damage, and start anew. The YA dystopia presumes that adolescents should be idealists, offering a gratifying view of adolescent readers as budding political activists—a portrayal that flatters adolescents and reassures adults that they are more than apathetic youth. However, the easily digestible prescriptions suggested by many of these novels may allow young readers to avoid probing the nuances, ambiguities, and complexities of social ills and concerns too deeply.

For all their overt didacticism, YA dystopias can also indulge a very different, and seemingly contradictory, impulse: escape from the strictures of social convention—surely an adolescent's dream. Scott Westerfeld reads

YA dystopias and postapocalyptic fiction as a release from the overscheduled pressures of contemporary adolescent lives:

> The other side of the boom in dystopian teen novels is a boom in post-apocalyptic tales. The system is asking a lot from teenagers and not giving them much respect in return, so it's no wonder that stories about that system exploding, breaking down under its own contradictions, or simply being overrun by zombies are also beloved of teenagers.
>
> What is the apocalypse but an everlasting snow day? An excuse to tear up all those college applications, which suddenly aren't going to determine the rest of your life?[12]

The dystopian snow day arguably demands a different kind of survival kit than the world many adolescents inhabit, and the result can be a gleeful sense of liberation. Furthermore, the dismantled structures of the dystopian world might possess a particular magnetism for readers who feel ostracized or otherwise alienated from current society. YA dystopias provide an island where misfit toys can shine, after traditional weights and measures of success have been discarded.

Both didacticism and escape have a role to play in the reception and impact of the YA dystopian genre. Although they may seem opposed, both elements have value on their own and in conjunction. Together they speak to the possibility that adolescents can at once fit themselves to better meet society's demands *and* shape society to better reflect their own desires and goals, creating the world they need, the world they want, and the world that they deserve.

YA Dystopias and Popular Forms

The YA dystopian genre belongs to the wider traditions of utopian/dystopian literature, science fiction, and children's literature. It also draws on a number of familiar, enduring, and popular plots and narrative forms, including the *Bildungsroman*, the adventure story, and the romance. Viewed cynically, the prominence of these recognizable elements and familiar plots may simply demonstrate the lucrative rewards of the dystopian label; placing a story of whatever genre in a dystopian setting seems to be a good way to raise sales. Yet there may be some aesthetic value to this mixture: if readers are already primed to respond to conventions they recognize from other works, they may find the new genre more resonant and accessible. At the same time, it's important to note that some readers, particularly new readers, may well be encountering these fundamental narrative structures for the first time within these texts, potentially breathing new life into older forms. As Laura Miller notes,

"An advantage to having young readers is that most of this stuff is fresh to them . . . To thrill them, a story doesn't have to be unprecedented. It just has to be harrowing."[13] But while the literary possibilities of this generic commingling seem evident, it's also possible that the political potentials of YA dystopias have been foreclosed by this association with more traditional narrative structures.

In emphasizing the trials of adolescents, YA dystopias recapitulate the conventions of the classic *Bildungsroman*, using political strife, environmental disaster, or other forms of turmoil as the catalyst for achieving adulthood. The novels detail how the conditions of the dystopian society force protagonists to fall from innocence and achieve maturity as they realize the dystopian realities in which they live. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan in their introduction to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003) remark on the ways in which "the dystopian citizen moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance."[14] Uncovering the failures of the dystopia often means leaving aside childhood and confronting the harsh truths of the adult world. As we discussed above, this awakening often includes a realization of how ruined the adult world has become: kids learn adults are lying, their parents have problems, the system can't protect them, they have to take care of themselves, and so on.

The confrontation with the realities of the adult world may lead to a standoff between adolescents and adults that empowers young people to turn against the system as it stands and change the world in ways adults cannot, locating the utopian potential of dystopian scenarios within YA protagonists themselves. The use of the *Bildungsroman* form, however, may also create ambivalence about the role of rebellion in facilitating growth. As young people stand up and fight the system, they also learn their own limitations. While the political awakening that YA dystopias associate with coming of age might inspire rebellion against a stultifying status quo, it also might teach their protagonists to strike a compromise between change and acceptance: to come to terms with an imperfect world. The ability of the protagonist to really envision something new might therefore be circumscribed by the conventions and forms of the *Bildungsroman* itself.

Another popular form on which the YA dystopia draws is the adventure genre, which found its apogee in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[15] Contemporary YA dystopias could in fact be seen as a reinvention of the adventure tradition, tapping into the appeal that popular adventure stories had and continue to have for their readers. In *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), John G. Cawelti defines adventure as the story "of the hero—individual or group—overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission."[16] If, as Martin Burgess Green writes, "adventure is the name for