Why Young Adults 'Hunger' For The Hunger Games And Other Post-Apocalyptic Dystopian Fiction

*By Debra Donston-Miller*

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Duels to the death. Revolution. Post-apocalyptic survival. Is this the stuff of popular young adult literature today? In a word, yes.

In the last few years, dystopian novels set in some dark, post-nuclear fallout future have dominated the young adult—better known as YA—bestseller lists. One of the most popular series is [“The Hunger Games,”](http://www.scholastic.com/thehungergames/) by [Suzanne Collins](http://www.suzannecollinsbooks.com/). The trilogy of novels—which includes “The Hunger Games,” “Catching Fire,” and “Mockingjay”—tells the story of Katniss, a young woman who must fight for her life in a televised death match and lead a rebellion against the oppressive powers that be.

Collins’ books and the movies based on them have been incredibly popular among readers of all ages, but most especially the YA audience. The book was first published in 2008, and at one point it was on the *New York Times*bestseller list for [more than 200 consecutive weeks](http://mediaroom.scholastic.com/press-release/scholastic-announces-updated-us-figures-suzanne-collinss-bestselling-hunger-games-tril). The movies based on the book have also been wildly popular, with the third in what will be a four-film series set to open tomorrow, November 21. (There will be two movies based on the “Mockingjay” novel.)

But while “The Hunger Games” trilogy is arguably the most popular of the YA-targeted dystopian novels out right now, it’s certainly not the only one. “[Divergent](http://www.amazon.com/Divergent-Veronica-Roth/dp/0062024035),” “[The Maze Runner](http://www.amazon.com/Maze-Runner-Book-1/dp/0385737955/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1416223518&sr=1-1&keywords=the+maze+runner)” and “[Legend](http://www.amazon.com/Legend-Marie-Lu/dp/014242207X/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1416223549&sr=1-1&keywords=legend)” are just a few of the many recently published books that tap into YAs’ hunger to read about dystopian societies in a post-apocalyptic future.

So, what’s driving this trend? And is it really a trend at all? After all, [Lois Lowry’s](http://www.amazon.com/Lois-Lowry/e/B000AP6Y8C/ref%3Dsr_tc_2_0?qid=1416223576&sr=1-2-ent) perennially popular “[The Giver](http://www.amazon.com/Giver-Quartet-Lois-Lowry/dp/0544336267/ref%3Dla_B000AP6Y8C_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1416223604&sr=1-2)”–which tells the story of a seemingly utopian but really dystopian society—was published more than 20 years ago. (Not for nothing, though: a movie based on the book was just released this year.)

Have young adults always been attracted to media in which darkness and death abound? Or is there something new driving YAs’ taste for dystopia?

**What’s Old Is New Again**

There *has* been an upsurge in dystopian-focused novels in the last few years, a trend that many experts attribute to the uncertain times young people are growing up in. Many of the new novels are set in a post-apocalyptic future, in which young people must clean up the mess their elders have made–not to mention struggle to live up to a new, sometimes unmeetable set of standards.

Todd Mitchell, author of the young adult novel [Backwards](http://www.denverpost.com/books/ci_24429386/book-review-backwards-by-todd-mitchell-new-take?IADID=Search-www.denverpost.com-www.denverpost.com) and other books, believes that the post-apocalyptic angle seen in so many YA novels today is a response to a deep-seated social need or anxiety.

“Right now, we know on some deeply unconscious (or maybe even conscious) level that we’re screwing things up,” he wrote on his [website](http://toddmitchellbooks.com/what-dystopian-and-post-apocalyptic-books-say-about-us/). “We know that all our pollution and over-consumption is driving the planet to ruin. We might not accept the science of climate change, but we can’t ignore all the droughts, floods, super storms, forest fires, heat waves and other signs of a world spinning out of balance. Nor can we ignore the many signs of social inequality leading to civil unrest.”

Mitchell thinks young people are especially sensitive to these issues, which has driven the popularity of books set in a bleak future.

“I think teens are particularly aware of this, perhaps because they’re not so invested in the status quo,” he said. “Or perhaps because this is the world they’re inheriting, and they’re [upset] that we’re trashing it. So there’s a thread of anxiety running through our culture.”

Indeed, what’s different today, says [Claudia Gray](http://www.claudiagray.com/), New York Times bestselling author of [“A Thousand Pieces of You,”](http://www.amazon.com/A-Thousand-Pieces-You-Firebird/dp/0062278967) is the amount of pressure on young people.

“I think the pressure on young adults to define themselves has increased, and it’s starting earlier and earlier in life,” said Gray. “We see increased standardized testing, increased homework levels, etc. By the time you’re 14, you’re already being forced into a mold that’s going to be hard to break out of.”

**Breakout Roles**

Gray noted that many dystopian, post-apocalyptic YA novels—including ‘The Hunger Games’ series–are specifically about refusing to accept the definitions, tests and choices forced on young characters by their society.

“The main characters in ‘The Hunger Games’ refuse to play the roles written for them,” said Gray. “Almost all YA dystopians at least touch on this theme–refusing to let anyone else define you.”

Today’s young people have also grown up amid threats of terrorism, ongoing war, and a 24/7 news cycle in which darkness and evil-doers are the stars of the show. The books they are drawn to may reflect the times they are living in.

“For today’s young adult audience, a world of instability, a world that is constantly teetering on the edge of another major catastrophe, is just the norm,” said Barna Donovan, director of the Graduate Program in Strategic Communication, Department of Communication and Media Culture, at Saint Peter’s University, in Jersey City, N.J. “When young adults read these books, stories about teenagers who must fight for their lives and fight for their freedom in a world that a previous generation has wrecked, they are reading a metaphorical representation of their own world. Today’s kids have been handed a world their elders mismanaged, used up, polluted and wrecked.”

Indeed, while their parents were pretty much guaranteed a job, a house and a comfortable retirement after college, young people today are facing a future in which very little is a sure thing (except, perhaps, student loan debt).

“Dystopian novels are merely all speaking to these anxieties of young people today,” said Donovan. “In all of these books, young adult protagonists must somehow learn to struggle through and survive in a world that has been exploited and defiled by previous generations and a world that is now ruled by dictatorial regimes that have eradicated all semblance of a democracy. What better metaphor could anyone create for the life of a teenager who knows he or she has no choice but take on a crushing amount of debt to go to college, to gain an education that will make it harder than ever to establish a career, all the while existing in a world of endless foreign wars and watched over by intrusive government bureaucracies and corporations that constantly spy on them on monitor all of their electronic communications?”

**Rise of the Machines**

The prevalence of technology may also be a factor fueling the popularity of dystopian, post-apocalyptic fiction among young adults. Via smartphones, tablets and, increasingly, wearables, tech is literally at our fingertips all day every day. And tech-savvy young people are well aware that being that connected means most of our movement and communication can be tracked. These are all themes that show up in current YA fiction.

But, wait. Isn’t that also the concept of Big Brother, from the George Orwell’s 1949 classic “[Nineteen Eighty-Four](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteen_Eighty-Four)?”

Yes, said Monique Anair, assistant professor of film and media studies at Santa Fe Community College, who also provides as food for thought classic dystopian movies of the ‘80s including “[Mad Max](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079501/).”

Anair believes we are at an interesting inflection point: In addition to young adults’ natural desire to see themselves in what they read and and watch, technology has made it possible to present those images more realistically (and, in some cases, spectacularly).

“The new thing is that novels are getting more play than ever before in film and television as the film industry seeks to engage the 13- to 34-year-old populations,” said Anair. “Sci-fi itself has increased dramatically with newer technology.”

No matter what the book or movie, said Anair, young adults are drawn to depictions of dystopian, post-apocalyptic worlds because they see themselves in them.

“In almost all dystopian worlds, young people hold the values that the adults have forgotten,” she says. “Against all odds in the horrible world that the adults have left them, the children know what is important. They love, survive and struggle to make sense of their own personal power. They learn to define sexual love and moral choices.”

It’s a story as old as time–and as new as “Mockingjay.”