

THE NEW YORKER

A CRITIC AT LARGE

FRESH HELL

What's behind the boom in dystopian fiction for young readers?

by Laura Miller

JUNE 14, 2010

Rebecca Stead chose to set her children's novel "When You Reach Me"—winner of the 2010 Newbery Medal—in nineteen-seventies New York partly because that's where she grew up, but also, as she told one interviewer, because she wanted "to show a world of kids with a great deal of autonomy." Her characters, middle-class middle-school students, routinely walk around the Upper West Side by themselves, a rare freedom in today's city, despite a significant drop in New York's crime rate since Stead's footloose youth. The world of our hovered-over teens and preteens may be safer, but it's also less conducive to adventure, and therefore to adventure stories.

Perhaps that's why so many of them are reading "The Hunger Games," a trilogy of novels by Suzanne Collins, which take place at an unspecified time in North America's future. Her heroine, Katniss Everdeen, lives in one of twelve numbered districts dominated by a decadent, exploitative central city called the Capitol. Every year, two children from each district are drafted by lottery to compete in a televised gladiatorial contest, the Hunger Games, which are held in a huge outdoor arena. The winner is the last child left alive. The fervently awaited third installment in the trilogy, "Mockingjay," will be published by Scholastic in August, and there are currently in print more than 2.3 million copies of the previous two books, "The Hunger Games" and "Catching Fire."

Collins's trilogy is only the most visible example of a recent boom in dystopian fiction for



For young readers, dystopia isn't a future to be averted; it's a version of what's already happening in the world they inhabit.

young people. Many of these books come in series, spinning out extended narratives in intricately imagined worlds. In Scott Westerfeld's popular "Uglies" series, for example, all sixteen-year-olds undergo surgery to conform to a universal standard of prettiness determined by evolutionary biology; in James Dashner's "The Maze Runner," teen-age boys awaken, all memories of their previous lives wiped clean, in a walled compound surrounded by a monster-filled labyrinth. The books tend to end in cliff-hangers that provoke their readers to post half-mocking protestations of agony ("SUZANNE, ARE YOU PURPOSELY TOURTURING YOUR FANS!?!?!?") on Internet discussion boards.

Publishers have signed up dozens of similar titles in the past year or two, and, as with any thriving genre, themes and motifs get swapped around from other genres and forms. There are, or will soon be, books about teen-agers slotted into governmentally arranged professions and marriages or harvested for spare parts or genetically engineered for particular skills or brainwashed by subliminal messages embedded in music or outfitted with Internet connections in their brains. Then, there are the post-apocalyptic scenarios in which humanity is reduced to subsistence farming or neo-feudalism, stuck in villages ruled by religious fanatics or surrounded by toxic wastelands, predatory warlords, or flesh-eating zombie hordes. An advantage to having young readers is that most of this stuff is fresh to them. They aren't going to sniff at a premise repurposed from an old "Twilight Zone" episode or mutter that the villain is an awful lot like the deranged preacher Robert Mitchum plays in "The Night of the Hunter." To thrill them, a story doesn't have to be unprecedented. It just has to be harrowing.

Dystopian novels for middle-grade and young-adult readers (M.G. and Y.A., respectively, in publishing-industry lingo) have been around for decades. Readers of a certain age may remember having their young minds blown by William Sleator's "House of Stairs," the story of five teen-agers imprisoned in a seemingly infinite M. C. Escher-style network of staircases that ultimately turns out to be a gigantic Skinner box designed to condition their behavior. John Christopher's "The White Mountains," in which alien overlords install mind-control caps on the heads of all those over the age of thirteen, tore through my own sixth-grade classroom like a wicked strain of the flu. Depending on the anxieties and preoccupations of its time, a dystopian Y.A. novel might speculate about the aftermath of nuclear war (Robert C. O'Brien's "Z for Zachariah") or the drawbacks of engineering a too harmonious social order (Lois Lowry's "The Giver") or the consequences of resource exhaustion (Saci Lloyd's "The Carbon Diaries 2015"). And, of course, most American schoolchildren are at some point also assigned to read one of the twentieth century's dystopian classics for adults, such as "Brave New World" or "1984."

The youth-centered versions of dystopia part company with their adult predecessors in some important respects. For one thing, the grownup ones are grimmer. In an essay for the 2003

collection “Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults,” the British academic Kay Sambell argues that “the narrative closure of the protagonist’s final defeat and failure is absolutely crucial to the admonitory impulse of the classic adult dystopia.” The adult dystopia extrapolates from aspects of the present to show readers how terrible things will become if our deplorable behavior continues unchecked. The more utterly the protagonist is crushed, the more urgent and forceful the message. Because authors of children’s fiction are “reluctant to depict the extinction of hope within their stories,” Sambell writes, they equivocate when it comes to delivering a moral. Yes, our errors and delusions may lead to catastrophe, but if—as usually happens in dystopian novels for children—a new, better way of life can be assembled from the ruins would the apocalypse really be such a bad thing?

Sambell’s observation implies that dystopian stories for adults and children have essentially the same purpose—to warn us about the dangers of some current trend. That’s certainly true of books like “1984” and “Brave New World”; they detail the consequences of political authoritarianism and feckless hedonism. This is what will happen if we don’t turn back now, they scold, and scolding makes sense when your readers have a shot at getting their hands on the wheel.

Children, however, don’t run the world, and teen-agers, especially, feel the sting of this. “The Hunger Games” could be taken as an indictment of reality TV, but only someone insensitive to the emotional tenor of the story could regard social criticism as the real point of Collins’s novel. “The Hunger Games” is not an argument. It operates like a fable or a myth, a story in which outlandish and extravagant figures and events serve as conduits for universal experiences. Dystopian fiction may be the only genre written for children that’s routinely *less* didactic than its adult counterpart. It’s not about persuading the reader to stop something terrible from happening—it’s about what’s happening, right this minute, in the stormy psyche of the adolescent reader. “The success of ‘Uglies,’ ” Westerfeld once wrote in his blog, “is partly thanks to high school being a dystopia.”

Take the Hunger Games themselves. In the first book of Collins’s trilogy, Katniss explains that the games are a “punishment” for a failed uprising against the Capitol many years earlier, and they’re meant to be “humiliating as well as torturous.” The twenty-four child contestants, called tributes, are compelled to participate, and the people of their districts must watch the televised bloodbath. Yet residents of the richer districts (District 12, Katniss’s home, is a hardscrabble mining province) regard competing as “a huge honor,” and some young people, called Career Tributes, train all their lives for the games. When Katniss herself becomes a tribute (she volunteers, in order to save her younger sister), she’s taken to the Capitol and

given a glamorous makeover and a wardrobe custom-designed for her by her own personal fashion maestro. She's cheered by crowds, fêted at galas, interviewed on national television, fed sumptuous meals, and housed in a suite filled with wondrous devices. She's forced to live every teen-age girl's dream. (Her professed claim to hate it all is undermined by the loving detail with which she describes every last goody.)

As a tool of practical propaganda, the games don't make much sense. They lack that essential quality of the totalitarian spectacle: ideological coherence. You don't demoralize and dehumanize a subject people by turning them into celebrities and coaching them on how to craft an appealing persona for a mass audience. ("Think of yourself among friends," Katniss's media handler urges.) Are the games a disciplinary measure or an extreme sporting event? A beauty pageant or an exercise in despotic terror? Given that the winning tribute's district is "showered with prizes, largely consisting of food," why isn't it the poorer, hungrier districts that pool their resources to train Career Tributes, instead of the wealthier ones? And the practice of carrying off a population's innocent children and commanding their parents to watch them be slaughtered for entertainment—wouldn't that do more to provoke a rebellion than to head one off?

If, on the other hand, you consider the games as a fever-dream allegory of the adolescent social experience, they become perfectly intelligible. Adults dump teen-agers into the viper pit of high school, spouting a lot of sentimental drivel about what a wonderful stage of life it's supposed to be. The rules are arbitrary, unfathomable, and subject to sudden change. A brutal social hierarchy prevails, with the rich, the good-looking, and the athletic lording their advantages over everyone else. To survive you have to be totally fake. Adults don't seem to understand how high the stakes are; your whole life could be over, and they act like it's just some "phase"! Everyone's always watching you, scrutinizing your clothes or your friends and obsessing over whether you're having sex or taking drugs or getting good enough grades, but no one cares who you really are or how you really feel about anything.

The typical arc of the dystopian narrative mirrors the course of adolescent disaffection. First, the fictional world is laid out. It may seem pleasant enough. Tally, the heroine of "Uglies" (and its two sequels), looks forward to the surgery that will transform her into a Pretty and allow her to move to the party enclave of New Pretty Town. Eleven-year-old Jonas, in "The Giver," has no problem with the blandly tranquil community where he grows up. Then somebody new, a misfit, turns up, or the hero stumbles on an incongruity. A crack opens in the façade. If the society is a false utopia, the hero discovers the lie at its very foundation: the Pretties are lobotomized when they receive their plastic surgery; the residents of Jonas's community have been drained of all passion. If the society is frankly miserable or oppressive, the hero will learn

that, contrary to what he's been told, there may be an alternative out there, somewhere. Conditions at home become more and more unbearable until finally the hero, alone or with a companion, decides to make a break for it, heading out across dangerous terrain.

Because these new dystopias follow a logic more archetypal than rational, many of them don't even attempt to abide by the strictures of science fiction. Or perhaps they care only about the third of Arthur C. Clarke's famous three rules of prediction: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." In her rooms in the Capitol, Katniss, who has previously spent her days poaching in the woods with a bow and arrow, finds she can "program the closet for an outfit to my taste. The windows zoom in and out on parts of the city at my command. You only need to whisper a type of food from a gigantic menu into a mouthpiece and it appears, hot and steamy, before you in less than a minute." She might as well be living in a fairy-tale castle, dining off enchanted golden plates that refill themselves every evening.

The snow-globe timelessness of these novels doesn't prevent them from incorporating the particular flavor of contemporary kid culture. Waking up in a hostile, confined place without an identity or any notion of what you're supposed to do or how you can get out—as Thomas, the hero of "The Maze Runner," does—is a scenario often found in video games. So are the rings that give their possessors more lives in Catherine Fisher's "Incarceron," where the characters are confined to a prison as big as a small country, complete with cities and metal forests. Like "The Maze Runner," "Catching Fire" features a moment in which the desperate players must picture the geography around them as seen from above, like a game board or puzzle in whose pattern can be found a crucial clue. There's more hand-to-hand combat in these dystopias than there was in the books of thirty years ago, and it's more important to the stories, which frequently culminate in a showdown resembling the climax of an action movie. Carrie Ryan's "The Forest of Hands and Teeth" takes an insular, vaguely medieval community reminiscent of the town in the M. Night Shyamalan film "The Village," subjects it to George Romero-style zombie attacks, and then throws in a love quadrangle with enough emo angst to rival "Twilight."

The experience of growing up under nearly continuous adult supervision—the circumstances that made writing about autonomous contemporary sixth-graders so difficult for Rebecca Stead—has tinged these novels as well. The protagonists in the technological dystopias of earlier generations frequently contended with surveilling cameras, hoping to either elude or defy them. Face-offs between the human eye and a soulless lens still occur; the teen hacker who narrates Cory Doctorow's "Little Brother," a privacy-rights anthem set in near-future San Francisco, provides helpful instructions on how to make a concealed-camera detector out of a toilet-paper tube and a handful of spare L.E.D. lights. Often, however, the attitude is sullen

resignation; in “Incarceron,” the hero, Finn, can do no more than note the small red lights of the prison’s ubiquitous “Eyes” staring down at him from the rafters. When Katniss is finally delivered into the Hunger Games arena, a tract of forest, she never even bothers to look around for the cameras; she knows they’re embedded everywhere. “It has probably been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me,” she thinks as she climbs down from a tree. “I know they must be tracking me now though. The minute I hit the ground, I’m guaranteed a close-up.” In “The Hunger Games,” surveillance is ambient.

The Internet plays a less important role in these novels than you might expect. One notable exception, M. T. Anderson’s merciless and very clever satire of late-capitalist complacency, “Feed,” has information (mostly advertising) piped right into people’s brains; the novel’s narrator thinks of the laptop era as being “like if you carried your lungs in a briefcase and opened it to breathe.” (“Feed” is one of the few Y.A. dystopias in which adolescence doesn’t confer any special immunity to the Big Lie. It’s a lot closer to “Brave New World” than to “The Hunger Games,” and its ending is notably downbeat.) In perhaps the most impressive of the recent crop, “The Knife of Never Letting Go,” by Patrick Ness, the Internet appears metaphorically, in the form of a virus that causes people’s thoughts to be broadcast into the minds of all those around them. “Information is absolutely everywhere today,” Ness has explained, “texts and emails and messaging—so much it feels like you can’t get away from it.”

Todd, the novel’s narrator, is a post-apocalyptic Huck Finn, the youngest resident of an all-male frontier town (the women have been killed off by the virus), where he’s bombarded by mental “Noise,” a cacophony of impressions and ideas, rendered at one point as a web of overlapping scrawls. Todd prefers to hang out in the nearby swamp, which is also Noisy, because the virus broadcasts animals’ thoughts, too, but less intrusively so:

The loud is a different kind of loud, because swamp loud is just curiosity, creachers figuring out who you are and if yer a threat. Whereas the town knows all about you already and wants to know more and wants to beat you with what it knows till how can you have any of yerself left at all?

The young readers of “The Knife of Never Letting Go” may feel the same way about their overscrutinized, information-flooded lives, or maybe that’s just how Ness thinks he’d feel if he were them. It somehow fits the paranoid spirit of these novels that adults are the ones who write them, publish them, stock them in stores and libraries, assign them in classes, and decide which ones win prizes. (Most of the reader reviews posted online seem to be written by adults as well.) But kids do read the books, and some of them will surely grow up to write dystopian tales of their own, incited by technologies or social trends we have yet to conceive. By then, reality TV and privacy on the Internet may seem like quaint, outdated problems. But the part about the world being broken or intolerable, about the need to sweep away the past to make room for the

new? That part never gets old. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: R. KIKUO JOHNSON

To get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: **Subscribe now**