



# READING FOR THE REVOLUTION:

## HOW DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE TEACHES YOUNG ADULTS TO THINK CRITICALLY



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Like millions of other middle schoolers in 2012, “The Hunger Games” fascinated me. The idea of a dystopian North America where teenagers must fight to the death as penance for a failed revolution (coupled, of course, with the love triangle trope that held the young adult dystopian genre in a tight grasp) was unique and intriguing.

It is no surprise that adolescents are drawn to dystopian books. Research by Justin Scholes and Jon Ostenson, associate professors of English, has shown that dystopian literature bridges the gap between childhood and adulthood in terms of cognitive thinking. They find that as adolescents develop, they are “able to grasp bigger, more abstract concepts and consequences in the world around them and can engage in more critical thinking; they also show increasing interest in issues related to



society at large.” Adolescence is the time when people begin developing deep moral values and questioning political structures. “The Hunger Games” allows them to explore and apply questions, like: *could a government be so cruel? Why are the citizens of Panem letting this happen? Can a 16-year-old really take down an oppressive regime?*

Introducing young adults to literature that allows them this expression while appealing to Young Adult (YA) tropes means that Generation Z has been decently exposed to political philosophy and commentary from a young age.

Of course, I had been shown dystopian literature before reading “The Hunger Games”: “The Giver” appeared on my seventh-grade syllabus, as well as “Fahrenheit 451” and the short story “Harrison Bergeron.” However, “The Hunger Games” was different. Unlike Bradbury and Vonnegut, Suzanne Collins wrapped her political commentary in a story about star-crossed lovers and the resilience of a teenage girl fighting for her family, her life and her people. As a result, “The Hunger Games” appealed to the masses and planted the seed for a generation of young adults to start thinking critically about their own government—a process further facilitated by other YA dystopian literature, such as “Divergent” by Veronica Roth and the “Unwind” series by Neal Shusterman. Now, amidst a pandemic and nearly a decade after Katniss drew her first arrow, we have to ask ourselves: was this crash course in political philosophy enough for Generation Z? Has dystopian literature adequately prepared us for this era in history?

First, we must determine if dystopian literature provides an accurate and relatable critique of our current society. Dystopia, according to Scholes and Ostenson, is used as “a literary technique to discuss reality,” meaning that some part of a dystopian story must be based in or on our reality. However, this typically comes in the form of referencing the society we currently live in as a society of the distant past. “The Hunger Games,” for example, takes place in the year 2147; any reference to a world before Panem is foreign to our main characters. Other dystopian literature, while not set in a specific year, is also characterized as taking place in the far future. How,

then, can we relate to a story that takes place decades (and even centuries) after us?

The answer is simple; the political commentary that dystopian authors present is based in our reality, even if the rest of the story is not. For example, “Fahrenheit 451” is famously a critique on government censorship. The idea of the police raiding our homes for books to burn may be outrageous, but the reality of government censorship is something we are quite familiar with. The same goes for more recent YA dystopian literature. In “Unwind,” teenagers can legally (and horrifically) be harvested for organs and body parts if their parents decide they no longer want them. The larger political commentary that Shusterman presents is actually on abortion and the question of how much say the government should have in bodily autonomy.

Dystopian literature is relatable in that we can recognize the larger political themes at play and even note similarities between what we are reading and our own society. Think about the last time you heard someone say that keeping your computer webcam uncovered meant that “Big Brother” was watching you, alluding to the omnipresent surveillance by the major antagonist in George Orwell’s “1984.” Or the last time a tweet compared a young, female activist to the likes of Katniss Everdeen. We, as a generation, have learned to call out when our world starts to take the shape of a dystopia. So, if we can recognize when our society feels dystopian, has YA dystopian literature adequately prepared us?

One can argue that YA dystopian literature, at its core, simplifies the political state too much. For example, President Snow from “The Hunger Games” speaks in evil aphorisms and forces teenagers to kill each other— he is blatantly the villain. Thus, one might argue that comparing the exaggerated evils of President Snow to former President Trump oversimplifies Trump’s character without actually holding him accountable for his actions. Only stating the similarities between Snow and Trump fails to identify the particular qualities and actions of each. When formulating robust governmental critiques, one cannot simply stop at broad comparisons. The same can be said for the intense anti-government themes of dystopian literature. Simply saying “government control is bad” can be dangerous, as it oversimplifies a complex political state that might deserve a more in-depth critique.

However, it is important to keep in mind that the audience of YA literature is, of course, young

adults. There is no expectation that readers between the ages of 12 and 18 have been taught complicated political theory—and that is assuming they have been taught political theory at all. Therefore, YA dystopian literature teaches complex ideas about politics through simplified themes. In “The Hunger Games,” we are introduced to the unfair consequences of class differences by being shown two extremes: the intense poverty of District 12 and the absurd wealth of the Capitol. The citizens of District 12 are putting their lives at risk for simple grain and oil, while the citizens of the Capitol partake in purging during feasts to keep indulging. The differences here are not subtle, but that is what makes them effective.

YA dystopian literature succeeds in its goal of introducing important socio-political themes and commentary to the next generation. This genre bridges the gap between childhood and adulthood by engaging teenagers in complex questions about our world. YA dystopian literature also enables teenagers to create a bridge between literature and the real world, facilitating questions and curiosity.

Backed by strong-willed and sympathetic characters like Katniss Everdeen, Tris Prior and Connor Lassiter, young adults are increasingly prepared to think critically about their world, governments and communities. These readers have grown up armed with questions and commentary, alongside fantasy and adventure. Generation Z has been tasked with challenging our political state more and more as each new novel comes out. It’s what we have been training to do since middle school.

