

Things Fall Apart: A Guide to YA Dystopian Literature

By Amy Sutherland

With the recent popularity of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, there can be no denying that dystopian literature has become one of the most read genres not only by young adults, but also by preteens and adults. Everywhere, people are talking about *The Hunger Games* and are searching for the next series to dig into.

There are a lot of reasons for the popularity of the dystopian genre. Suzanne Collins' agent posits some of these factors:

"This is a population of young people who don't remember a time when the country was not at war. It makes perfect sense that their literature would allow them a way to exercise their thoughts about the nature of good and evil, and that it might reflect violence and great loss." (Corbett, 2011, p. 21)

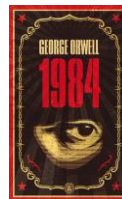
For all audiences, dystopian fiction gives readers a chance to question the world in which they live. Dystopian novels are also appealing because they cut across age, gender, and interest boundaries. They appeal to a diverse readership, and, while the stories may seem foreign and forlorn, they have enough whispers of reality that what could be an extreme future actually

seems plausible, leaving readers with the idea that *this could happen to me*.

Because of the wide appeal of this genre, an abundance of dystopian novels have been published. In an attempt to sort through the sea of options, I searched for books which would appeal to many audiences, especially teen readers, so I kept in mind many of the popular themes of Young Adult literature: challenging authority, the potential for romance, and coming into one's own as individual. And, as much as we all loved *The Hunger Games*, I wanted to avoid stories which were replicas of Collins' work. Instead I searched for dystopian novels which weren't the "same old story." Using these criteria, I narrowed down a massive genre to eleven recommendations.

The Classic

1984 by George Orwell, 1949



Winston Smith lives in a world of absolute control, where Big Brother watches over everyone and the Thought Police uncover secrets and betrayals. Winston does not question the world in which he lives until he falls in love with Julie, and, together, they

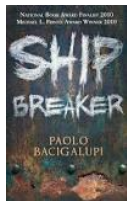
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begin to ask questions about their world, but the answers come at a great price and risk.

Any list of dystopian literature would be remiss without acknowledging this classic novel. While some may not consider this a Y.A. novel, many teens read *1984* in high school, and many of the themes of this text match those of Y.A. literature, such as the struggle against authority, the controlling presence of authority, and the potential for romance. As a bonus, there is also a movie version, which may be appealing to reluctant readers.

A View of the Future

Ship Breaker by Paolo Bacigalupi, 2010.



Teenaged Nailer works to scavenge copper wiring from the oil tankers that have become abandoned in the American Gulf Coast. Then, one day, he stumbles upon a find more valuable copper wiring: a wealthy girl who could change his life and his future.

The winner of the American Library Association's 2011 Printz Award, this novel appears on almost every booklist for dystopian fiction. It features many of the popular themes of Y.A. literature, including

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a male protagonist, wealth discrepancies, the potential for adventure, and the possibility of romance.

The Maze Runner by James Dashner, 2009.



Thomas wakes up one day in the Glade, without any memories, surrounded by a group of boys who also have no idea why they are there. Every day is marked by the opening of stone doors to the maze, which then close tightly every night. Thomas must figure out what is going on and why he was sent there. But, to do so, he must first remember all of his memories.

This novel, featuring a male protagonist, is appealing because it is about a group of teenagers banding together to take down authority. To add drama to the plot, the day after Thomas arrives in the Glade, a girl shows up, bringing with her the potential for romance. There has also been a movie adaption made of this novel, and the trailer makes it look excellent.

Incarceron by Catherine Fisher, 2007



Entrapped in Incarceron, a vast and sprawling prison, seventeen year old Finn has no knowledge of the world outside the prison. A crystal key, however, gives him the chance to glimpse the outside world by helping him communicate with Claudia, the warden's daughter. With Claudia's help, escape becomes a possibility for Finn, one darkened by the secrets of the prison which holds them both.

Similarly to *Ship Breaker*, *Incarceron* is featured on many library booklists and in many articles about Y.A. literature. It features male and female protagonists who come from different worlds. The notion of the prison harkens back to Bentham and Foucault's notions of the Panopticon. While many teens would not notice this, it may make for interesting discussions when reading this book. The notion of imprisonment would be especially appealing to teen readers as they begin to test boundaries in their own lives.

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Legend by Marie Lu, 2011.



For fifteen year old June, life in the Republic is privileged. She comes from one of the elite families and is being trained to enter one of the highest military circles. Fifteen year old Day, born into the slums, has a different experience of the Republic as he is the country's most wanted criminal. When June and Day unexpectedly meet under tense circumstances, they begin to uncover alarming truths about the Republic and their lives.

Similarly to *Ship Breaker* and *Incarceron*, this novel comes highly recommended from many booklists. As seems to be a common theme in Y.A. dystopian fiction, this novel features a male and female protagonist with a class discrepancy between them who must come together to take down the regime.

Shatter Me by Tahereh Mafi, 2011.



Juliette cannot touch anyone. Because, the last time she did, the result was terrible. And now she is in jail for murder, forgotten by the Reestablishment. That is, until the world begins to fall apart and the Reestablishment realizes that Juliette's inexplicable powers may be more useful than they thought.

The concept for this novel is unique and captivating: a girl who can kill people simply by touching them. But what is perhaps more interesting is the experimental style in which it is written. Using the first person point of view allows Mafi to show readers Juliette's thought process, which is illustrated throughout the book by the crossing out of certain sentences. This is exemplified on the cover of the book, in which the words "my touch is lethal" are crossed out, and next to them is written "my touch is power."

Gone by Michael Grant, 2008.



Suddenly, one day, all adults disappear. Now, Sam and Astrid must fight to survive in a world that has turned to chaos. Together, they must seek answers before they turn fifteen, when they, too, will become adults and disappear forever.

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What teen hasn't wondered what would happen if no adults existed? Like *The Maze Runner*, Grant gives readers the chance to play out this scenario and offers readers a chilling glimpse into the implications. It is an empowering novel for teens, showing young adults banding together, or breaking apart, and establishing their own rules and order.

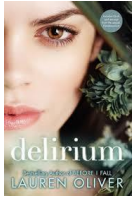
The Knife of Never Letting Go by Patrick Ness, 2008.



Welcome to Prentisstown, a place where everyone can hear each others' thoughts, so there is a constant noise and, more importantly, no secrets. This is the world in which Todd Hewitt lives. Until one day, for the first time, he finds silence, a silence that will force him to question Prentisstown and run away from all he's ever known.

The concept of this story is common and appealing (especially to fans of *Twilight*): being able to read other people's thoughts. Beyond this, Ness' book seems to balance being an enjoyable read with the potential for analysis. Ultimately, it seems to be a book of substance and pleasure combined.

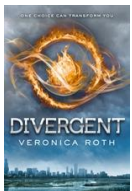
Delirium by Lauren Oliver, 2011.



Like everyone else in her society, Lena Holoway awaits her eighteenth birthday, the day when she'll receive the cure for one of the most painful diseases: love. That is, until ninety-five days before her birthday, when she falls in love.

Unlike many of the other novels which include a male and female protagonist, this novel focuses only a female protagonist. Furthermore, it seems to be a hybrid between two genres: dystopian and romance. Because of this, it may appeal to readers who enjoy romance novels and who may be uncertain about reading dystopian novels.

Divergent by Veronica Roth, 2011.



Beatrice Prior lives in a world where everyone lives according to five factions: candor, erudite, amity, abnegation, and dauntless. At the age of sixteen, all teens take an aptitude test to determine where

they are best suited to live. But things are complicated for Beatrice. Her aptitude test is inconclusive. She is divergent.

Much like *The Hunger Games*, this novel has risen in fame and popularity. While some may suggest that it is just another version of *The Hunger Games*, the concept is quite different, leading to a fresh and captivating story. It is action-packed and exciting, with whispers of romance and political turmoil.

Blood Red Road by Moira Young, 2011.



Saba's life is suddenly turned upside down when her twin brother, Lugh, is kidnapped. Lost without him, Saba must find the strength within herself and learn about her true potential to be able to save her brother.

Like many dystopian novels, Saba, the protagonist, is an unlikely hero who must find her own strength and rise against the enemy. This is an inspiring and motivating theme for young adult readers, as they begin to develop into the people they will become.

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