

## Radicalism and Dystopia

**“Would you give up your ability to think independently in exchange for being happy, beautiful, perpetually healthy, and rich?”**

**-Scott Westerfeld**

Welcome to this issue of YA Hotline. We hope to introduce you to an important theme for young adult readers: dystopia and political literature. When we were first exploring possible topics for this issue we were torn. We were interested in dystopia, political activism, radicalism and ideology. The bigger question was how to bring these related ideas together, as they do not fit into a single genre. In trying to tie dystopia

and politics together, we realized the link: The teenage years are about defining who you are and what you stand for. Often during these years, teens distance themselves from the ideals that they received from their parents. They begin to explore the ethics and politics of the world around them. Hintz and Ostry mention that utopian and dystopian writings “may be a young person’s first encounter with texts that

systematically explore collective social organization” (p. 2). Although utopia and dystopia are both important in discussions of society, we felt that teens were more drawn to the dark feel of dystopia. We hope to present the non-fiction works in this Hotline as a bridge from dystopic literature into the real world.

*Utopian and Dystopian: Writing for Children and Young Adults.* Edited by Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry. New York: Routledge, 2003.

### Radical Materials in the Library

The content and format of anti-establishment, radical, and subversive literature is often designed to shock, persuade, or incite strong emotion. In many cases, then, such works defy the norms that apply to other library materials.

Young adult books are generally expected to meet certain standards of appropriateness for the age group, but these qualities are highly subjective, especially since the determination of “appropriateness” is made by people who are not teenagers. Moreover, teens tend not to restrict their interests to Young Adult literature; they most certainly read adult books as well. Since rebellion is a typical part of adolescence, it is not surprising that teens are

drawn to anti-establishment themes and works that may not be aimed at their age group.

The primary goal of a library is not to foment rebellion, but it does have responsibilities with regard to supporting intellectual and educational development in its community. The inclusion of anti-establishment materials in a library can meet this two-fold purpose by:

- 1) providing quality materials to readers (of all ages) who are interested in political or radical fiction and non-fiction
- 2) providing young readers with the opportunity to become aware of alternative viewpoints that they may not encounter elsewhere.



**Abbie Hoffman:** Non-conformist, anti-establishment activist, ‘yippie’.

## So what is dystopia?

Dystopia is often less well defined than utopia. At the very basic level, utopias are wonderful places where nothing bad happens, and dystopias are horrible places where many bad things happen. But the truth of it is, when you look very closely, the two can run together quite easily. Heaven and hell are very much in the eye of the beholder and an examination of the literature can show that what was once written as a utopia can now be read as a dystopia. This paradox does not reduce, however, the important impact that these works can have on the reader.

We have focused on defining dystopian fiction by the setting. The society in which the story unfolds is almost a character in itself. Although it is not really a genre, dystopian fiction does have some defining characteristics that we have also considered.

### And political literature?

Political literature and manifestos can be seen as the non-fiction side of dystopian writings. These works encourage people to think about the world that they live in and how it functions. Works of radical political theory analyze the role of power, communication, and the status of the individual in society in much the same way that

#### The nature of power

This is often at the core of dystopia: what is power and how can it be wielded? Many dystopian novels show the consequences of absolute power.

#### Communication

There is almost always a focus on the control of information in these worlds. The communication between people may be limited or strictly monitored, the official news agencies are almost exclusively controlled by those in power, and certain forms of communication like writing and reading may not be present.

#### The status of the individual

Many dystopias focus on the role of the individual in society. Often individualism is suppressed or destroyed and sameness is encouraged. At the same time, there is a focus on the power of the individual and whether the one can stand against the many. Many dystopias are based on a

skewed utilitarian philosophy that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one. However, in others, individualism is lost to hedonistic pleasures and an almost willing surrender of independent thought.

Another facet of dystopian novels is the post-apocalyptic setting of the society in question. It seems that the absolute power often comes into being as the result of a major crisis. These crises have changed over time and are often a reflection of the political and environmental climate that the author inhabits. In the 1920's and 30's there was often a focus on the "red threat" where people have lost their identity to the great state. This was later replaced by worlds ravaged by nuclear war or toxic pollution.

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dystopic fiction does. Both dystopic fiction and radical political theory critique society either as it exists now (*Fight Club, The Communist Manifesto*) or as it might exist if political change does not take place (*Brave New World, Das Kapital*). Many Young Adults attracted to the radical and socially responsi-

ble messages of dystopic fiction can turn to radical political literature to gain an understanding of the political dynamics of the society they live in, and their place within that society, both of which are important components of the development of adulthood.

## So What is Dystopia, Continued

Genetic engineering, body modification surgery, disease pandemics, corporate power, and overpopulation have all formed the background of dystopian tales. Basing the apocalypse on a familiar threat allows the reader to more clearly understand the society and how it came to be.

In most dystopian novels there is a focus on a single hero who either knows or learns that something is seriously wrong. In some cases, like the *Handmaid's Tale*, the hero remembers what life was like before. In others, like *The Giver*, the society seems a utopia until the hero learns an awful truth. And in still others, like *1984*, the hero must have their eyes opened by another rebel. This hero almost always chooses to fight or escape

knowing the risks of this choice and that failure is very likely. The victory is not in winning the fight but in the fight itself, because it is the right thing to do.

There are two major feelings at the end of dystopian novels, although the actual story is almost always unresolved. The first, seen as the more adult option, is the complete failure of the hero. Not only do they fail to overthrow the ruler, they return to the way they were before the story began. The classic example of this is Winston in *1984*. When he chooses to save himself over Julia and returns to his old life, the reader sees the futility of the struggle. Critics say that this dark ending should galvanize the reader to act before it is too late, but others say that

this ultimate failure does not give the reader the hope necessary to choose to act. The dystopian novels written for young adults tend to follow the second pattern, which is to leave the reader on an upswing. Although the situation may not be resolved completely, the old regime has often fallen and there is hope that what comes next will be better. This is done subtly in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where we know from the notes at the end that Gilead has fallen, but we do not know the fate of Offred or the other of that world. In *House of the Scorpion* when Matt takes control of Opium we know that the old regime has come to an end, but we do not know how he will deal with the power he has been given.



**Vera Zasulich:** Marxist writer, political leader, forgotten revolutionary heroine.

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"The Dystopian Novel". H2G2. BBC Online. Retrieved April 8, 2007 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A510922>.

## Why is this important for young adults?

Over and over we hear in the news about the disengagement of young people with the world around them. This is not to say that all young adults are disengaged or even that participation in certain facets of society are required, but we must understand how valuable a skill it

is to be able to navigate the societal thought process.

There is much talk in library literature about information literacy and critical thinking skills. Dystopian and political literature are great ways to encourage these skills.

These works show teens that questioning authority and the

way things are is necessary and healthy. Programs in the library based on these literatures can provide a safe place for the discussion of many important, but controversial, topics.



**V.I. Lenin:** Political prisoner, writer, revolutionary