

What is the Difference between Dystopian, Apocalyptic, and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction?

By Kristen Rose

At its simplest, a dystopia is a world with a corrupt and oppressive government that shows no signs of ending anytime soon (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). It is not an ideal world, but it is not in any danger of ending (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). Post-apocalyptic fiction on the other hand, is a story where the world has already ended and what is left of humanity is trying to survive (Seisser, 2014). Apocalyptic fiction is a story where the world is currently ending (Seisser, 2014). While all three genres are futuristic and often dark, the condition of the world is an important distinction.

What is apocalyptic fiction?

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction are not for the faint of heart. They focus on survival, and are enjoyed by fans of action, adventure, and science fiction (Seisser, 2014). Since the world is ending or has already ended, conditions can be bleak. Despite their darkness, these genres serve as a form of escape (Seisser, 2014). When problems faced by the protagonist are matters of life or death, smaller problems faced by the reader seem much more manageable (Seisser, 2014). Rather than an escape to an ideal world, they provide a glimpse into a much darker reality, making present circumstances seem more bearable. Within the genres there is a lot of variation. The world can end in different ways, including natural disaster, war, or pandemics (Seisser, 2014). They can be set in the distant future, or in the present day (Seisser, 2014). Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction can also draw on elements from other genres (Seisser, 2014). Some overlap with fantasy or science fiction, while others are more realistic. Another common element is the inclusion of a dystopian government (Seisser, 2014). This can cause confusion between the genres, but even if there are dystopian elements involved, if the world is ending or has ended, it is a type of apocalyptic fiction, not a dystopia.

How is dystopian fiction different?

Like apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, dystopias can take place in either the near or distant future. While the world is not ending, there are other elements that define dystopian fiction. Some of these features are unjust laws, pressure to conform, media suppression, lack of individual freedom, and suppression of emotions (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). While survival is key in apocalyptic fiction, freedom (or the lack thereof) is central to dystopian fiction (Gadowski, 2015). They typically involve a rebellion or a fight against oppressive authorities (Reeve, 2011).

Dystopian fiction is not new. It has been around since H.G. Wells and George Orwell in the early 1900s (Reeve, 2011). So why are today's teens still reading it? Like apocalyptic fiction, the dark futures of dystopia offer readers an escape (Reeve, 2011). They promote conversations of change and social reform (Vance, 2016). Dystopian fiction takes the injustices of today's world to an extreme. According to Margaret Atwood, dystopias are an unpleasant society, deliberately arranged by the government (Flood, 2020). As Reeve (2011) argues, they offer readers hope, in that we still have time to change our world before things get as bad as they are in the book. Reeve (2011) explains,

The settings [of dystopian fiction] may be nihilistic, but the message that an individual can make a difference and that courage and ingenuity can triumph even in the most dreadful circumstances, is anything but (p.36).

While apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and dystopian fiction have their differences, all three genres encourage critical thinking and show readers the difference that an individual can make (Vance, 2016). They are valuable genres that have inspired teen readers for decades. For some book recommendations from each genre, see the chart below.

<i>Dystopian Fiction</i>	<i>Apocalyptic Fiction</i>	<i>Post-apocalyptic Fiction</i>
 <p>https://tinyurl.com/adx9uszk</p> <p>Sanctuary by Paola Mendoza and Abby Sher</p>	 <p>https://tinyurl.com/4kraupzc</p> <p>Shatter Me by Tahereh Mafi</p>	 <p>https://tinyurl.com/yxbkamcr</p> <p>The Sound of Stars by Alechia Dow</p>
 <p>https://tinyurl.com/8ssum4rz</p> <p>The Grace Year by Kim Liggett</p>	 <p>https://tinyurl.com/6nfpbhc</p> <p>Dry by Neal Shusterman and Jarrod Shusterman</p>	 <p>https://tinyurl.com/wj5jynk2</p> <p>The Fever King by Victoria Lee</p>

References

- Flood, A. (2020, April 16) Margaret Atwood: Covid-19 lockdown is not a dystopia. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/16/margaret-atwood-covid-19-lockdown-is-not-a-dystopia-handmaid-s-tale>
- Gadowski, R. (2015). Contemporary dystopian fiction for young adults: Brave new teenagers ed. By Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, & Carrie Hintz (review). *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 53(3), 87. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2015.0064>
- Reeve, P. (2011). The worst is yet to come. *School Library Journal* 57 (8), 34-36. <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=the-worst-is-yet-to-come-dystopias-are-grim-humorless-and-hopeless-and-incredibly-appealing-to-todays-teens>
- Scholes, J., & Ostenson, J. (2013). Understanding the appeal of dystopian young adult fiction. *The ALAN Review*, 40(2), 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v40i2.a.2>
- Seisser, C. (2014, October 21). Genre guide: Post-apocalyptic fiction for teens. *The Hub*. <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2014/10/21/genre-guide-post-apocalyptic-fiction-for-teens/>
- Vance, C. K. (2016). Censorship in the library: The dark side of dystopia. *Against the Grain*, 28(4). <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7453>