

Raised on Revolution, Condemned for Being Revolutionaries: Apocalypse Teens

By: Sarah Maddox

Patrick S. Tomlinson, in a thread of online tweets in February of 2018, said it best:

"You watched a generation grow up on a diet of Harry Potter, Hunger Games, and Marvel movies, you stripped away their hope, their jobs, their futures, and then backed the most cartoonish super-villain in history for President, and you're shocked the children are fighting back?"

"Really? You followed the damned script to a T. You pumped up millions of kids, for two decades, to believe they and their friends could make a difference. Then you thrust them all into a dystopian nightmare of violence and persecution. And NOW you're shocked they're all Katniss?"

"Get them, children. Leave no one standing." (Tomlinson 2018).

2018 was hardly the beginning of our troubles, and it wouldn't be the end either. After the enormous challenges of 2020, Tomlinson's point rings true now more than ever.

And it's no wonder. Teens now seem to be dealing with more life-altering, trauma-inducing events than ever before: the Covid-19 pandemic, school shootings, and police brutality, only to name a few. While parents still flinch when news of a new shooting hits the front page, teens and young adults sigh and keep scrolling - it's not only unsurprising, it's expected. For lack of a better term, we are living in the very dystopian, apocalyptic future we read about.

Tomlinson makes a direct correlation between the consumption of dystopian and apocalyptic YA literature and the rise of teen and young adult activists. A decade ago, you might not have been able to name any, but today they are household names: Greta Thunberg - Climate Activist, Malala Yousafzai - Girl's Education Activist, the Parkland Shooting Survivors - Gun Control Activists, and the list goes on.

Dystopian fiction not only taught these teens that they had the power to stand up to corrupt authority, but that they had the duty: *"While you live, the revolution lives."* (Collins 2009). They stand up against cruelty, abuse, and corruption despite facing criticism at every turn: "So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old-fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!" (Trump 2019).

It begs the question: would we have so many teen activists if Katniss had never shot President Snow? If Jonas hadn't ever left his community, baby in tow? If Tris hadn't broken the mold?

Of course, dystopian novels and stories of teen revolution are not solely responsible for the uptick in teen activism. And yet, we can't deny that the written word is empowering, and it can, in fact, help to shape a generation at its core.

Some teens seem to turn to dystopia for guidance as a way to understand the chaos they live in. Others seem to turn away from it entirely, as it offers nothing new, no reprise, in contrast to their lived realities. It's a complicated world that teens live in, and we as librarians and information professionals can offer them just a little bit of a leg up on the ladder to understanding, coping or thriving via dystopian literature.

References

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