

Speculative Fiction: An Overview

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Speculative fiction is a super genre encompassing a multitude of genres and subgenres that each have their own speculative elements, like high fantasy or science fiction. Reading such books is known to boost imagination, resilience, and emotional intelligence (Jones 2020). Esther Jones writes that the distance speculative fiction provides gives young readers an opportunity to stretch their imaginations and consider ways to overcome the social or fantastical challenges submitted in the work (2020). She also writes that when young people can see themselves in these works where the characters are surviving, saving the world, and learning important lessons, it allows young adult readers to develop their own strategies for resilience (2020).

But what is included in speculative fiction? What are the many subgenres?

Alternative Histories

These works use real-world events as well as figures from history and explore what could have happened if a person acted or if the event had ended differently (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Notable YA work:

Black, H. (2010). *White Cat* by Holly Black. Margaret K. McElderry Books.

White Cat explores a world where it was not alcohol that was banned in the 1920s, but magic. Instead of powerful crime families that rose during the prohibition, crime families are magic workers who continue practicing their craft in the criminal underground.

Cyberpunk

These works typically depict an urban setting with futuristic technology and are characterized by a contrasting criminal underworld below and powerful mega-corporations taking the place of government above (Neon Dystopia, n.d.).

Notable YA work:

Lu, M. (2017). *Warcross*. G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers

Warcross isn't just a game. It's a way of life for many users and a job for teenage hacker and bounty hunter, Erika Chen, who hunts down those who bet on the game illegally.

That is, until she hacks into the game herself and accidentally becomes an overnight sensation.

Dystopian Fiction

These works feature a society of people who are dehumanized and afraid and are often characterized by strict government control or outright oppression (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Notable YA work:

Oliver, L. (2011). *Delirium*. HarperCollins.

This dystopia takes place in an alternate United States where love is a dangerous disease and citizens must undergo The Cure to keep them safe from it.

High Fantasy

High fantasy is characterized by a large cast of characters, a magical system, multi-volume series, an imaginary world with detailed world-building, and a battle of good versus evil that jeopardizes the entire world. Medieval social structures are also often in place (MasterClass, 2022).

Notable YA work:

Bardugo, L. (2012). *Shadow and Bone*. Henry Holt & Company.

The nation Ravka has been torn in two by the Shadow Fold, a place of darkness crawling with flesh-eating monsters, and its fate may rest on the shoulders of Alina Starkov and her unexplained powers.

Horror

These works provoke an emotional response from readers typically relying on psychological elements or goriness to do so (Britannica, 2023).

Notable YA work:

Power, R. (2019). *Wilder Girls* by Rory Powe. Delacorte Press.

18 months ago, Raxter School for Girls was put under quarantine, and soon both teachers and students began dropping dead. Cut off from the rest of the world, the girls wait for the promised cure, until Hetty's best friend goes missing. Hetty will do anything it takes to get her back, even if it means going beyond the fence.

Magic Realism

These works feature the portrayal of magical events while using a realistic tone. This style originated in Latin America (Britannica, 2022).

Notable YA work:

Walton, L. (2014). *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender*. Candlewick Press.

Ava is a normal girl, aside from being born with the wings of a bird. As she ventures into the world to understand who she is and her fantastical disposition, she isn't ready for the horrors of the world and the twisted motivations of others as trouble closes in on her.

Occult Fiction

These works involve witchcraft, spiritualism, psychic phenomena, voodooism and mysterious or secret knowledge attainable through supernatural means. These stories often portray a battle between light and darkness (Malatesta, 2018).

Notable YA works:

Sterling, I. (2019). *These Witches Don't Burn*. Razorbill.

Hannah is a teenage witch. A real one, with elemental powers. She spends most of her time avoiding her ex-girlfriend and hanging out with her best friend, but high school becomes the least of her worries when a Blood Witch arrives in town and saving the witches of Salem rests on her shoulders.

Paranormal Fiction

This includes phenomena that go beyond science like clairvoyance, telekinesis, or the presence of ghosts (Malatesta, 2018).

Notable YA work

Young, S. (2023). *In Nightfall*. Delacorte Press.

Theo and her brother Marco move to the small town of Nightfall, Oregon, to live with their superstitious grandmother, whose only house rule is to be home before dark. They quickly befriend an enigmatic girl, Minnow, and her friends, and soon realize that their magnetic pull isn't what it appears. Something truly terrifying emerges after dark and it doesn't want them to leave.

Post-Apocalyptic

This type of fiction explores how humans pick up the pieces of a world after it has fallen apart, whether by nuclear fallout, zombie apocalypse, or another catalyst (Pagan, 2019).

Notable YA work

Yancey, R. (2013). *The 5th Wave* by Rick. G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers.

The first wave left nothing but darkness. After the second wave, only the lucky escaped. And the third? Only the lucky ones survived. After the fourth, survival hinges on trusting no one. At dawn on the fifth wave, Cassie is alone running from *Them*, the beings who roam the land killing anyone they see, and Cassie is among the few scattered human survivors. When Cassie meets a friend, she must choose between the safety of remaining alone and the hope of trusting again if she wants to rescue her brother.

Gothic Fiction

These works are hauntingly dark with plots of mystery and horror. They are often characterized by settings like medieval castles, secret passages or trap doors (Britannica, 2022).

Notable YA work

Parker, N. C. (2014). *Beware the Wild*. HarperTeen.

This southern gothic follows Sterling and her brother Phin. After an argument, Phin runs into the dangerous Louisiana swamp and doesn't return. Instead, a mysterious girl appears. When no one in town can remember Phin ever existed, Sterling must find out what happened and what the other girl has to do with it.

Science Fiction

Works in this genre explore the impact of science and technology on society, often how it can go too far and become harmful (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Dow, A. (2022). *The Kindred* by Alechia Dow. Inkyard Press.

To avoid a revolution, the galactic empire created Kindred mind pairings to ensure connections between rich and poor individuals. Joy Abara is a commoner, whose only claim to notoriety is being Kindred to the nobility's infamous playboy, Duke Felix Hamdi. When the royals are assassinated and Felix is accused of the murders, they meet to hide from the person hunting him and crash land on a strange planet called Earth, where they discover the true strength of their bond and decide their galaxy's future.

Steampunk

A subgenre of science fiction, steampunk involves real or imagined steam technology from the 19th century as well as much of the Victorian aesthetic with a futuristic flair. Technology like automatons and airships are often present (Heckmann, 2022).

Notable YA work

Carriger, G. (2013). *Etiquette & Espionage*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Sophronia, who prefers taking apart clocks and terrorizing her mother over learning about polite society, is sent to finishing school and discovers that her school covers a larger scope than her mother could have ever expected. Sophronia learns the fine arts of etiquette as well as espionage, diversion, and how to kill.

Urban Fantasy

Urban fantasy brings fantastical elements like magic and fantastic creatures into real-world settings and examines what our lives would be like with a bit of magic (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Notable YA work

Shuttleworth, A. (2021). *A Dark and Hollow Star*. Simon Pulse.

Set in modern-day Toronto, four queer teens must solve the sudden series of murders that threaten to expose the existence of faeries to the modern world. Should they fail, they risk the destruction of faerie and human worlds alike.

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