Dystopia: A futuristic, imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Dystopias, through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system.

Dystopian Elements and Characteristics - Basic Building Blocks of Dystopia

The dystopian stories are often stories about survival; their primary theme is oppression and rebellion. The environment plays important role in dystopian depiction. Dystopian stories take place in the large cities devastated by pollution. In every dystopian story, there is back story of war, revolutions, overpopulation and other disasters.

The dystopian depiction is imaginary. Dystopian fiction borrows features from reality and discusses them, but it doesn't depict contemporary society in general. Dystopian stories take place in the future, but they are about today and sometimes about yesterday.

All dystopias are keen on a strict division of the citizens by intellect, ability, and class. In Brave New World, people are divided in Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons. In Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984), there are capitalist and proles, Party and non-Party. In a typical dystopia, there is no social group except the State or such social groups are under government control. Independent religions do not exist among social groups, instead of that, there is a personality cult (usually of a head of state) created by the State, such as Big Brother in Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984) and The Benefactor of We.

The institution of family has been eradicated in some dystopian societies, as in Brave New World, where children are reproduced artificially. If the family exists in dystopian stories, it is usually in the service of the State as in Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984), where children are thought to spy on their parents.

Dystopian tales emphasise a sense of the powerlessness of the individuals in the face of the oppressive and brutal government run by a totalitarian dictatorship, or organized into massive bureaucratic institutions (as in Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984), the Ministry of Information). Paranoia is very evident among the citizens of dystopian societies who live in fear and who are being monitored, betrayed or manipulated. The Thought Police and the Thought crime in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984) are the most extreme examples of paranoia. Dystopian fiction features technology more advanced than we have today, and the group in power controls it.

The standard of living among the classes is lower than in contemporary societies. In Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984), the upper class of society, The Inner Party has a standard of living poorer than the upper class in the real word. But in Brave New World and Equilibrium, people have a higher standard of living in exchange for a loss of independent thought and emotions.

The hero in dystopian literature always questions society although he is usually in high-standing within the social system. He often sees what's wrong and tries to change the system. He puts his hope in a group of people who aren't under the complete control of the state, in Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984), they are "proles", in Brave New World they are people on the reservation and in We, they are people outside the walls of the One State. His goal is either to escape or destruction of the society's principals, but usually, he fails in his intention to change anything, and sometimes they themselves end up changed to conform to the society's rules.

Why Do We Like Dystopian Novels?

Dave Astor, Contributor

Author, ‘Comic (and Column) Confessional’

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War. Death. Despair. Oppression. Environmental ruin. Yup, when it comes to demoralizing literature, dystopian novels have it all! Yet many of us love this genre, and there are good reasons we do.

For one thing, we’re reading about rather than actually living through the bad stuff happening in the near or far future (though that bad stuff is often an extrapolation of our troubled current world). We’re not “in the arena” like the beleaguered tributes of The Hunger Games, the dystopian trilogy I recently finished.

And, while dystopian novels are depressing, there’s a certain “rightness” in reading about a future that’s negative. Why? Because we know that politicians, military people and corporate moguls are capable of doing awful things — meaning dystopian novels feel kind of honest.

The Hunger Games certainly felt honest. That terrific trilogy gives its memorable characters some uplifting moments, but there are a greater number of downbeat outcomes — especially in the third instalment, Mockingjay. So, even though The Hunger Games (first book) and Catching Fire (second book) are more engaging (albeit often horrific), the final book truly rings true. Dictatorship, revolution and counterrevolution usually cause severe physical and psychological damage to the victims and other participants. To her credit, author Suzanne Collins doesn’t sanitize that for us.

Other excellent dystopian novels are also filled with carnage, inhumanity, hopelessness and more. Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World. George Orwell’s 1984 and Animal Farm. H.G. Wells’ The Time Machine and The Shape of Things to Come. Mary Shelley’s The Last Man. Lois Lowry’s The Giver. Cormac McCarthy’s The Road. Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451. Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange. William Golding’s Lord of the Flies. Sinclair Lewis’ It Can’t Happen Here. Jack London’s The Iron Heel. Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, Oryx and Crake, and The Year of the Flood. Etc.

Sometimes, authors of dystopian literature temporarily ease the tension a bit with humour, as the great Atwood does with some of the clever genetic-engineering terms she coined for Oryx and Crake. And dystopian books can have seemingly utopian elements — with things not appearing too bad even though they are bad; Brave New World is a perfect example. There are even novels, such as The Shape of Things to Come, that mix dystopian and actual utopian elements.

We admire the best dystopian novels because they’re written well and depict people we can relate to. We’re fascinated by the terrible things these characters face, and by how some react bravely and some react cowardly or with resignation. We, as readers, rubberneck to see the misery; we can’t avert our eyes even as we’re enraged by what despots and other vicious officials are doing to citizens. And we’re compelled to turn the pages as we wonder if rebels and other members of the populace can somehow remake a wretched society into something more positive. We also wonder who will survive and who won’t; I was surprised by some of the characters who end up dying in The Hunger Games (a trilogy I read on the enthusiastic recommendation of commenter “threnodymarch”).

Last but not least, we admire dystopian novels because, by giving us worst-case scenarios of the future, maybe our current society can be jolted enough to avoid those scenarios eventually happening in real life. Like some of the characters in dystopian novels, we might feel a little against-all-odds hope. Then again, maybe not...

What are your favourite dystopian novels, and why do you like them? Or are you not that fond of the genre, and why?