

The Freedom to Choose: Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

By Marjorie Warmkessel



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In the publishing world, “young adult” refers to people between the ages of 12 and 18, in other words adolescents or teenagers. “Dystopian,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is an adjective meaning “of or pertaining to a dystopia,” which is “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible.” The etymology of the word is the Greek prefix “dys,” meaning “bad” or “abnormal,” and the Greek word “topos,” meaning “place.” “Dystopia” is closely related to the word “utopia” (literally “not a place,” the Greek prefix “ou” meaning “not”), which since the time of Sir Thomas More’s 1516 work of that name has meant “a place where everything is perfect.” “Fiction,” of course, refers to works of literature (primarily novels or short stories) that describe imaginary events and people. So, putting the definitions together, “young adult dystopian fiction” denotes novels that have been primarily written for and marketed to people between the ages of 12 and 18 and that describe really bad places or conditions.

We haven’t had the category of “young adult fiction” or even “young adults” forever. The idea of young adults or teenagers as a distinct social demographic goes back only to about the 1940s, and the first wave of books written specifically for young adults, such as *The Outsiders* and *Are You There God, It’s Me Margaret*, appeared in the 1960s and 1970s.¹ Among the key features of these books are main characters who are themselves young adults and descriptions of situations that are similar to those confronted by real life young adults, including coping with coming of age and dealing with

contemporary social issues. It was not until the late 1990s that young adult fiction was aggressively marketed as such. In this period, young adult books became best sellers and big Hollywood movies. Among the best-known young adult titles of this period are the Harry Potter books, the *Twilight* saga, and *The Hunger Games*.

My title, “The Freedom to Choose,” is a fragment of a sentence from Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, published in 1993 and considered one of the first young adult dystopian novels. In 2014, twenty years after the book’s publication, *The Giver* was made into a movie starring Jeff Bridges in the title role and Meryl Streep as the head of the Council of Elders. Even if you never read the book or saw the film, you may remember the TV ads from 2014 that featured Ms. Streep saying the complete line: “When we give people the freedom to choose, they choose wrong.” And this is one of the common themes of dystopian fiction: a totalitarian government controls the lives of its citizens. Individuals in these fictional societies are not free to choose.

The protagonist of *The Giver* is 12-year-old Jonas, a young adult who lives with his parents and younger sister in a small community where everything is regulated, everyone has exactly what they need, and surveillance is the norm. There is no poverty, no crime, no disease, no war. “Sameness” is valued; individuality and diversity are seen as threats. Residents have no communal memory, no sense of history beyond their own lifespan. A major ritual in Jonas’s society is the Ceremony of Twelve, the time when all

12-year olds are given their training assignments for jobs they will hold for the rest of their lives. Jonas' mother works at the Department of Justice, responsible for enforcing the community's many rules; his father is a Nurturer of Newchildren.

Jonas' assignment comes as a complete surprise, not only to him but also to most members of the community: he is assigned to be the Receiver of Memory, a highly respected job but one that is seldom assigned, no more than once every generation or two. In this society, one person holds all communal memories. With memories come emotions, which are highly discouraged and even chemically controlled. Jonas begins to train with the previous Receiver of Memory, an old man he calls the Giver. He feels pleasure and pain for the first time. He also becomes aware of the flaws in this supposedly perfect society. He has grown up knowing that the elderly are eventually "released," but through his training with the Giver, he realizes that "released" means euthanized. He also becomes aware that rule violators are killed. When his father brings home a troublesome newborn who does not conform to behavioral expectations, Jonas realizes that if the baby does not eventually behave, he too will be "released." With the Giver's help, Jonas takes the baby and escapes the confines of the only community he has ever known.

Often in dystopian fiction, the circumstances that led to the creation of the sociopolitical structure are gradually revealed to the reader. Usually it is something catastrophic, motivating those who survive the disaster to rebuild society while trying not to repeat what they interpret as the mistakes of the past. While Lowry does not reveal what happened to cause the creation of the world she describes, it is clear that those in power are motivated by good intentions even if the reader, and eventually Jonas, recognize that

these intentions are misguided. Sameness, control of emotions, strict rules, and surveillance are all intended to protect citizens from each other and from themselves. What results, however, is a culture that does not tolerate diversity, lacks creativity, is satisfied with the status quo, and accepts murder as something that sustains the greater good. In such a culture, citizens do not even recognize that they have no freedom to choose.

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In other dystopian worlds, citizens are well aware that they are not free. They exist under totalitarian regimes run by ruthless dictators whose sole objectives are to stay in power. This kind of dystopia is the world of *The Hunger Games*. First published in 2008, *The Hunger Games* is the first book of Suzanne Collins' bestselling trilogy, all three books of which became blockbuster Hollywood movies. At the beginning of the novel, 16-year old Katniss Everdeen lives in District 12, the poorest district in the country of Panem. As a means of keeping the populace under control, the government carefully restricts its citizens' access to food, requiring each district to send food and other natural resources to the Capitol. Another way the government controls its citizens is by holding the annual Hunger Games, gladiator-style televised spectacles where twenty-four competitors, a boy and a girl from each district, literally fight to the death, using their wits and physical prowess to be the last one left alive—a barbaric practice made all the more appalling because the participants, called Tributes, are people between the ages of 12 and 18. Katniss becomes the female Tribute from District 12.

References to tributes, gladiators and other aspects of Roman history are not accidental. The president is Coriolanus Snow, the host of the televised games is Caesar Flickerman, and the head game-maker is Seneca Crane. Even the name of the country, Panem, is Latin for

bread and brings to mind the phrase "panem et circenses," "bread and circuses" or "bread and games," used by the Roman satirist Juvenal in his criticism of the superficiality of imperial Roman culture, when bread and games were offered as diversions to distract people from more serious social concerns and responsibilities.

Traveling to the games with Katniss is Peeta, District 12's male tribute. Once they arrive, Katniss and Peeta become keenly aware of the conspicuous consumption of residents of the Capitol. Here people have so much food they throw it away; they are obsessed with their physical appearance and preoccupied with all things trivial and superficial. The citizens of the Capitol would fit right in on *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and offer a harsh contrast to residents of the remote districts, who are literally starving.

The well-orchestrated pageantry of the pre-game ceremonies, featuring individual interviews with each competitor, is televised live across Panem and required watching for everyone. The stability of the government depends, in fact, upon its skillful manipulation of communication and public relations tools. Up to this point, no one has been successful in destabilizing the government. It is our heroine Katniss who finds the chink in the president's armor, reluctantly becoming a symbol of growing unrest across the country. Challenging the very rules of the Hunger Games, Katniss refuses to kill Peeta when the two of them are the last tributes alive. Much to the chagrin of the government, they emerge as co-victors, the first time that had ever happened.

In *Catching Fire*, the second book of the trilogy, President Snow challenges Katniss directly by changing the rules for the Hunger Games so that only past victors can compete. Katniss and Peeta

once again represent District 12 and once again they both survive as rebellions erupt across Panem. By the end of the third book, *Mockingjay*, Katniss has succeeded in spearheading the overthrow of the repressive government along with facilitating the demise of President Snow and other corrupt political leaders. She returns to District 12, marries Peeta, and lives happily ever after.

A surprisingly domestic, fairy-tale-like ending, given the plot's concerns with state power and liberty, but remember that the target audience for these books is adolescents, people who, because of hormonal changes, are particularly interested in romantic relationships. Their authors are usually willing to cater to this kind of demand; Katniss actually has more than one love interest throughout the series. Older readers may find it tempting to envision the intelligent, resourceful, independent Katniss playing a pivotal role in the establishment of a new government. Why would she not want to provide visible leadership in creating a free and open society where resources are shared equitably and no one goes hungry? However, for the late Millennials who read *The Hunger Games* as young adults when it was first published and for those who are now young adults (for whom we do not yet have an agreed upon name), the idea of Katniss as a government leader is seen as unimportant, perhaps even undesirable. After all, throughout her life, she has not been able to trust government leaders or, for that matter, most adults. Maybe she's done enough and deserves a quiet life of anonymity.

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The *Divergent* trilogy by Veronica Roth, published between 2011 and 2013 and set in post-apocalyptic Chicago, describes a society divided into five factions: Abnegation, Amity, Candor, Dauntless, and Erudite. Members of Abnegation are selfless, valuing the needs of others above their

own. The ruling Council is made up of 50 people, all members of the Abnegation faction since they are thought to be incorruptible. Members of Amity value peace and harmony, are willing to help others, and are able to let go of past hurts. Members of Candor value honesty, perceiving charm and politeness as tools of deception. Members of Dauntless are brave and guard the fence around Chicago. Members of Erudite value knowledge, viewing ignorance as the primary threat to society. Membership in a faction is determined by giving all 16-year olds an aptitude test. Regardless of the test results, individuals can choose any of the factions.

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The heroine of *Divergent* is 16-year old Tris Prior, a young adult who is born into an Abnegation family. Her aptitude test is inconclusive as three possible factions are suggested to her: Abnegation, Dauntless, and Erudite. That she has an aptitude for more than one faction, by definition a "divergent," is unusual and is considered a threat to society since "divergents" are capable of independent thought. At the Choosing ceremony, she chooses Dauntless, something almost unheard of for someone born and raised in Abnegation.

As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that the leaders of Erudite are planning to use members of Dauntless

to infiltrate and destroy Abnegation so that Erudite can control the ruling Council. Tris and some of her Dauntless cohorts are central to discovering and thwarting the plot, but not before many of their friends and family members are killed in fighting and acts of terrorism. Ultimately, through the third book of the trilogy, it is revealed that the society of *Divergent* was established as a result of genetic engineering experiments gone horribly wrong. Many years before, in an attempt to eradicate social problems thought to be caused by "bad genes," government scientists modified people's genetic profiles. Those with modified or damaged genes rose up against the government; in the ensuing uprisings half the population was killed. In response, the government once again turned to genetic engineering to create people with pure genetic profiles. These people became known as "divergents."

This plot point represents another common theme in dystopian young adult fiction: that previous generations, often with the support of the government, have really made a mess of things, either intentionally or unintentionally, and often through the misuse of technology. Subsequent generations, in trying to fix the problems, have succeeded only in making matters worse. As the plots of these novels unfold, it is clear that the future of civilization and maybe even the future of the human race lie in the hands of the young adult heroines and heroes of our stories, along with their peers and a small handful of trusted older people.

This theme provides a clue as to why dystopian fiction is so popular with young adults—and that is the question to which we now turn.

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Dystopian fiction may appeal to young adults because they can identify with the protagonists, who are

themselves young adults. While the fictional characters may seem to live in a universe totally different from our reality, on many levels they are coping with the same issues as real teenagers. More than one scholar has suggested that teenagers can easily relate to a dystopian world because they see their own world as a dystopia. High school students enjoy very little autonomy or independence; parents, teachers, and other adults are always telling them what to do and what not to do; and they must navigate through countless rules and regulations, many of which seem petty and arbitrary. All the while, adults are assuring them that this is for their own good.

When they are expected to make decisions about their future, they see every decision as potentially life changing and fear that the wrong decision could prove catastrophic. As with the Ceremony of Twelve in *The Giver*, the reaping ceremony in *The Hunger Games*, and the choosing ceremony in *Divergent*, adolescents on their way from childhood to adulthood are expected to take an array of high-stakes tests, to make some important decisions (often for the first time in their lives), and to take responsibility for the consequences of those decisions.

Adolescence is a time when most people first begin to grapple with abstract concepts and try to think about the complex moral issues playing out in the world around them. Dystopian literature often shares these themes. Additionally, young adult readers observe that the characters of these novels start out as ordinary teenagers but, through circumstances beyond their control, are challenged to do difficult and frightening things in order to protect those they love, or to fight injustice, or to save themselves. In most cases they succeed, but their successes always come at a price. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trilogies are very violent. People get killed. Good people get killed, not just the bad guys.

So why are we seeing such a profusion of young adult dystopian novels now? One reason is the current political climate. Earlier dystopian novels reflected Cold War sensibilities. More recent dystopian novels reflect a post-9/11 culture. Keep in mind that although today's young adults are too young to have any personal memories of September 11 (even if they were alive in 2001, which many of them were not), they are well aware of the events and attitudes precipitated by 9/11.

As mentioned earlier, a name for the generation that comes after the Millennials has not been agreed to yet. The generation after the Baby Boomers is Generation X. After Gen X come the Millennials or Generation Y. So, logically, the next group would be Generation Z, but who would want to be a member of Generation Z, presumably the last generation? Even in dystopian novels there's almost always a glimmer of hope for a brighter future.

British economist Noreena Hertz has coined the term Generation K for those born between 1995 and 2002. She has begun doing research on this group, specifically young women. In 2015 she published the results of a survey of more than a thousand British and American girls who were between the ages of 13 and 20. She found that their formative years had been influenced by three major factors: technology (especially social networking technology to connect with others), the major global economic upheaval of 2008, and very real geo-political dangers. Among other things, she found that only four percent of her respondents trust big corporations (as opposed to 60% of adults) and only 10% trust the government (as opposed to 20% of Millennials). And where does the term Generation K come from? Professor Hertz named them K for Katniss Everdeen, heroine of *The Hunger Games*.

Note

1 Some novels published before the naming of the "young adult fiction" category, like *Lord of the Flies* or *A Separate Peace*, have since been so categorized.

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