Trends in Speculative Fiction amongst Young Adults

Movements in genres and the popularity of genres generally reflect the current world. For this reason, some works may increase in popularity significantly later than their initial release dates.

To fully understand the growing trends of a genre, it is necessary to look at its surrounding society. Exponential increases in technological devices and added stresses in young adults’ lives lead to a larger population of young adults who are interested in speculative fiction. There is a draw toward experiencing an extreme of current society with the hope of somehow learning ways to fix it for future generations.

A key component in today’s world, which is both helpful and harmful, is technology; it is today’s necessary evil. Cell phones, tablets, laptops, and other technological devices have permeated American society. While these devices are extraordinarily helpful, people have become so attached to them that the devices have become distractions. While necessary for functioning in today’s society, technological devices also contain numerous risks and dangers, many of which we are currently discovering. “Technologies are not always used for the purposes their inventors intended (or even for purposes their inventors would approve of), nor can the knock-on effects of any new technology be predicted” (Anderson 211). The constant bombardment of technology, and the ways that it is currently used are both beneficial and harmful. Facebook is a platform for many types of adolescent bullying. It is also a place where people fill time and feel the need for constant updates if they are to remain in the social loop. If not Facebook, there are plenty of other social media sites that create more distractions and artificial realities. There is a direct correlation to the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genre because we do not know how to control these devices, and their exponential increase leaves people in a cognitive overload. People feel overwhelmed by the technology in their daily lives and the need to maintain it.

Young adults are overwhelmed with the amount of technology that surrounds them; many have commented on the fact that they feel consumed by it. They have stated that on occasions where they are isolated from technology, they initially experience extreme anxiety about being disconnected from the world around them, but after a few days, they feel freedom and relief; they can focus on the people around them. Continuous exposure to technology takes over their lives and restricts their abilities to focus on simple tasks. This lack of control regarding technology mirrors what they see in the world around them. “I suspect that young adults crave stories of broken futures because they themselves are uneasily aware that their world is falling apart. We might pummel them with advertising that says they should buy a new iPod, or Xbox, or Droid XYZ, and that everything in the world is shiny and delightful—but whether we’re looking at the loss of biodiversity, or
the depletion of cheap and easily accessible energy, or the hazards of global warming, our children will inherit a world significantly depleted and damaged in comparison to the one our parents handed down to us. And they know it” (Bacigalupi).

There is a desire for stories of broken futures because teens feel that they are beginning down that path; there is a need to know the future and ways to prevent it. Speculative fiction needs to be viewed as preventative medicine. People do not want to read about uncontrollable chaos; they want the ability to control the chaos and to see what will happen in the future. Understanding what will happen and why it will happen creates a comfort zone for young adults. When continuously pummeled with advertising for the newest technological toy, they are also pummeled with the visual hyperactivity that follows this; the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genre is another way of dealing with the continuous chaos.

The idea that technology will slowly, or more quickly than some would like, take over society is beginning to take form. In Lev Grossman’s Time article, “2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal,” the progression of technology and the Singularity are discussed in detail. (According to Kurzweil, the Singularity is when humans and machines become one. At this point machines will control humans more than humans will control machines.) “Five years ago we didn’t have 600 million humans carrying out their social lives over a single electronic network. Now we have Facebook. Five years ago you didn’t see people double-checking what they were saying and where they were going, even as they were saying it and going there, using handheld network-enabled digital prosthetics. Now we have iPhones. Is it an unimaginable step to take the iPhones out of our hands and put them into our skulls?” (Grossman). The rate at which technology is increasing and affecting daily life is tremendous. People need to find new ways to adapt their lives, but the problem is that people cannot keep up with the speed of the growth. No one knows definitively how the changes will affect our future, and the young adult population is at the forefront of this learning curve. They are the first ones to be targeted for the newest technology, and they experience the burden of teaching adults how to use it. Because of this progress and the unease associated with it, coupled with the struggling economy, people are drawn toward dystopian works, many of which feature technology and the ways that it will take over and/or control societies.

Young adults experience various stresses in their lives, including friends, family, personal identity, their individual and collective future, and sense of belonging in the world, which leads to the desire to explore others’ lives. Speculative fiction allows young adults to be voyeurs in a socially appropriate way. "As my [Fraustino] editor Ben Barnhart says, ‘It can be comforting, in a strange sort of way, to read a story in which the terrifying struggles and tribulations of the main character force your own problems to fade away’" (Fraustino). Reading about someone else’s struggles allows the reader to experience something worse than reality, but also allows reentry into actual reality upon completion of the work. The reader gets to experience struggles that s/he may be experiencing in another venue, but may also have the chance to be the hero in a serious problem. A positive result of speculative fiction is that the reader frequently gains insights into dealing with struggles and social problems that s/he might be experiencing in another capacity. Solutions and ideas may emerge from the experience. For example, while not a typical young adult novel, Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake discusses the idea of bioengineering and food. After experiencing this novel, people are more aware of what they eat, where food originates, and other issues surrounding the human struggle.

With all of the economic and environmental chaos that is currently taking place, teenagers look to make sure that their lives have the potential to be better than those of whom they read. There is a recognizable need for improvement. They also like to be the heroes; authors who write about young adults as heroic protagonists give young adults the foresight and power to correct the future. By giving worst case scenarios, young adults are able to see that their lives aren’t as bad as they may perceive, while providing visions of the future. Because the world is in such a state of turmoil, this is an especially applicable time for change; “...many literary historians believe that the function of utopian literature has been to serve as literary escape from severe economic problems in the late nineteenth-century United States and, in doing so, to act as a fertile ground for attempts at self-definition as a nation with problems, surely, but with the spunk and ingenuity to overcome them” (Kolmerten 1155). The change is that people see the flaws in utopias; speculative fiction allows people a different kind of escape. The reader gets the chance to redefine him/herself as a cog within a larger society. The need for a literary escape is dire; today’s teenage population was born into a time of comfort and privilege; an economic downturn results in a culture shock; they have never dealt with difficulties like this before, so an escape and an exploration into an alternate society is welcomed.

Writers frequently write about what they know in a sense that they reflect their current situations, whether they are political, emotional, academic, etc. "Although utopian writers may do nothing to improve a society, they may still deem it worthwhile to preserve the concept of the ideal” (Kateb 620). Part of speculative fiction is the fact that there is always an opposite; there is a presentation of hope that people want to explore. It may or may not actively try to improve a society, but by work read, the message is disseminated. The political messages that are woven into these works expose young adults to that aspect of life and politics in an accessible way. The ideal, just as the catastrophic, is necessary to include in the same genre because both are clearly flawed and frequently arise from each other. Neither is the actual balance necessary to maintain a functional society, but both are places where learning begins. Young adults are learning about the functionality of the world around them; extremes are ways that will eventually lead them to a middle ground.

Speculative fiction becomes more popular in times of crisis because people need ways to look for the positive. There is a desire to explore what happens after the destruction; people want to see the eventual and possible rainbows and sunshine that follow tragedies. Adolescence is a time of turmoil, so the desire for speculative fiction increases.
"They are learning what the world is, and they are learning what human life is, and they are learning about ugliness and beauty, and they’re learning about kindness and cruelty, and they’re learning about moral values . . ." (Young Adult Fiction Gets Apocalyptic). This genre provides a venue for the exploration of morality, politics, and human nature for young adults. Our society functions on the ability to understand human nature; speculative fiction is one way to explore that topic. Currently, the bombardment of technology has caused young adults to shelter themselves from many parts of the social world; they are drawn toward speculative fiction because it is a safe way to experience and prepare for what may lie ahead. Young adults already possess various degrees of awareness about the world around them. These works function as warped mirrors of our world; a world that needs fixing.

The knowledge of having a world in chaos is very stressful to many young adults, even if they are not directly aware of this stress. Technological advancements alone are not enough to maintain a viable society where people can live, not just exist; humanity needs social bonds for survival. "And so we read again and again about the child of dystopia who makes us feel hope for mankind, even if, in the case of M. T. Anderson’s futuristic Feed, it turns out that the society is beyond repair. All the protagonist can do in that failed world is begin to understand and care about where we went wrong—which is exactly what the reader needs to do now to prevent a dystopian future" (Fraustino). In Feed, Violet tries to defeat the feed, but in the meantime her plan to resist starts to fall apart. This feed is similar to what exists today with cell phones and other wireless devices that continuously send information to its users. The more young adults explore the genre, the more solutions they may create to fix or re-create our society. The genre serves as a warning to readers: Fix this society before it needs to be destroyed to create a new one. Young adults are aware of this and want to see creative ways to work within a society.

Speculative fiction does not arise out of a vacuum. It is a criticism and a reflection of the current world. Between 1888 and 1920, over two hundred utopian novels were published; a reflection of economic downturn. Authors such as William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, and Frank Norris published them. Most of these books were written by Protestant, middle class, white men, but they reflected the time period. "These two hundred-plus books, of course, reflect more than just the turbulent economic and political era in which they were written. They also reflect, through their plot structures and language, the ambivalences inherent in an American culture that has promised the world—as a city on a hill—that it is founded in egalitarianism, which, in fact, it is not. What is perhaps most striking about this genre is that the novels reflect their particular historical time most strikingly by what they lack, by what is absent in the books: any utopian vision for correcting gender or racial inequalities" (Kolmerten 1156). It brings about an awareness that makes the reader stop and consider what is going on in the world. The potential to make a reader take a critical look at the surrounding world is powerful.

Humans are looking for something better. People who are interested in the genre are not just looking for the terrifying future that may evolve; they are looking for solutions in the grand scheme of life. "My students and I don’t see desperation in these books; we see hope and the power to right wrongs" (Miller). While most of these works begin in a place of chaos, there is general hope. The difference between dystopian and utopian works is that even within the utopia, there are flaws. The dystopia presents the flaws and hopes for correcting them.

Today’s increase in the genre is similar because of the economic downturn but has progressed because there are a variety of authors who are able to be included in the genre. Furthermore, the audience has been expanded drastically to include young adults as well as adults who may have varying degrees of interest in the topic. The Eleventh Plague by Jeff Hirsch reflects our current world in a post-apocalyptic manner. There are Starbucks buildings that are crumbling away, theme parks and civilizations that are falling apart, and humanity is in mass chaos. The main character, fifteen-year-old Stephen Quinn, must struggle to define his survival in this new world that has been devastated by a war and a plague. This is a reflection of today’s world to which young adults may relate because it simply takes what we know as a society and adds the aftermath of destruction. There is survival of the fittest as well as the struggle for re-creation. Adding a main character who is a teenager is a very effective tool because it draws more teens to the genre. This book, which has a reading level similar to The Hunger Games, provides a story that gives young adults with a variety of reading abilities access to the work.

The Hunger Games trilogy is a valuable resource for this type of study because it is a book in which timing and content is everything. In a world where people are struggling for security and knowing who they are, especially young adults, this type of book that glorifies young adults, especially females, is representative of the struggles that children face. It is even more valuable because it appeals to males and females as well as young adults and adults. "For the most part, dystopian fiction owes more to myth and fairytale than science fiction. These are essentially heroes’ journeys—they just happen to be set in an imagined future world. The hero, reluctant or unwilling, is just as likely to be female as male. Something happens—an event, or a messenger arrives bearing news—and the teenage protagonist is catapulted out of their normal existence into the unknown. They cross the threshold into a world of darkness and danger, of allies and enemies, and beginning a journey toward their own destiny that will change their world. They will be tested, often to the very edge of death. The stakes are high. The adults are the oppressors. The children are the liberators. It’s heady stuff, far removed from the routine of everyday life" (Young). The Hunger Games portrays the adults as the oppressors and children as the saviors, so there is hope at the end. You see Katniss struggle for acceptance within the arena; if the public doesn’t root for her, she will not be able to survive the games.

Current YA speculative fiction frequently focuses on protagonists who have to save the earth/country/locale from the disasters of modern society. For instance, Octavia Butler’s Lauren Olamina from Parable of the Sower has to lead an entire group of people in a post-apocalyptic new world.
and begin a new religion. Suzanne Collins’ Katniss Everdeen has to survive the Hunger Games and lead District 12 to victory. The growing trend in speculative fiction in which the youth revolt is a replacement for the utopian literature of the past. It gives young adults the hope that they can fix the current problems in society. “Given the dehumanizing representations of the marketplace and the commodification of the individual in these (M. T. Anderson’s Feed [2002], Nancy Farmer’s The House of the Scorpion [2002], and Pete Hautman’s Rash [2006]) texts, the authors articulate a revolution in a speculative future that is no better than present-day conditions” (Ventura 90). While today’s physical conditions may be better than those represented in Parable of the Sower, Feed, and The Hunger Games, the reality is that the moral corruption, struggle for power, and climatic conditions for a disaster really do exist. These books are just extreme examples of what we already know, but they are there as a warning to individuals. Young adults are reading this because they already possess various degrees of awareness about the world around them that are continuously developing. These works function as warped mirrors of our world; a world that needs fixing, by a society who is actively engaged in the genre.

Speculative fiction makes statements about politics, current events, and human nature. It asks its readers to be aware of those statements. A key to the growth of this genre is the fact that people live in constant fear and discomfort about the world around them. There is too much overstimulation, uncertainty, and external stress for young adults to feel that their future paths are clear and safe. They are drawn to this genre for answers and comfort; many of the works end with hope. Ultimately, readers are looking for potential good in their futures.

**SELECTED READING MATERIALS FOR YOUNG ADULTS**


**WORKS CITED**


“Young Adult Fiction Gets Apocalyptic.” Talk of the Nation. (July 6, 2011) Retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com/queens.ezproxy. cansy.edu:2048/pss/1.do?id=GALE%7CA260733146&v=2.1&u=csny_queens&it=r&p=LitRC&s=w


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