

DYSTOPIA FICTION

The following works of dystopic fiction have been selected based on positive reviews found in one or several of the following sources: *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *School Library Journal*, or *Booklist*. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but we hope to highlight classic and contemporary works of dystopic literature that have appeal for teens.

Contemporary Fiction Recommended for ages 10 - 14

Haddix, Margaret. *Turnabout*. Toronto: Simon Pulse, 2000.

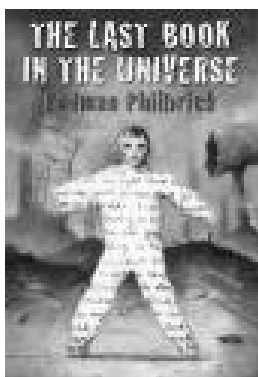
Like many works of speculative science fiction, *Turnabout* is set in the future. The year is 2085, and Melly and Anny Beth are teenagers suffering the consequences of a medical experiment gone wrong. Eighty-five years earlier, in the year 2000, both women were centenarians in a nursing home who

participated in Project Turnabout – whereby they were injected with a new drug that would reverse the aging process and let them return to their ideal age. When the second injection, which was to halt the reverse aging process, fails, Melly and Anny Beth face the prospect of ‘unaging’ back to infancy.

The parallels between infancy and old age are poignant and teens will recognize contemporary debates on the dangers of medical advancement and media frenzies as Melly and Anny Beth search for a way to live out the rest of their days for a second time.



Philbrick, Rodman. *The Last Book in the Universe*. Toronto: Scholastic, 2000.



Civilization has been destroyed by a cataclysmic earthquake and the radiation, toxic gases and acid rain have made the planet unlivable. A small group of people have sealed themselves within the protected city of Eden, but everyone else must try to carve out an existence in the Urb. People escape the world around

them by using mind probes. Spaz has epilepsy and can't use the probes, giving him a unique outlook on his world. When his foster sister becomes ill with leukemia Spaz must try to find her. Along the way Spaz robs a man who will give everything up except the book he is writing, which exposes Spaz to something he has never seen be-

fore. Gathering others along the way, Spaz tries to find his sister and get her to into Eden so that she can be saved.

Awards:
YALSA 100 Best of The Best Books for the 21st Century

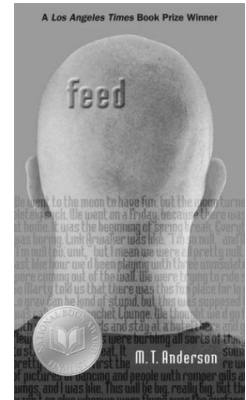
Anderson, M.T. *Feed*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2004.

In this futuristic story, we see the world through the eyes of Titus, a teenage boy governed by the omniscient presence of his implanted feed, but brought to awareness through his relationship with Violet, who has led a very different life. Teens will recognize and relate to the host of negative stereotypes embodied by the teens of this bleak world: “The young people are bored unthinking

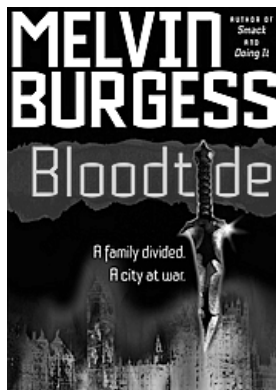
pawns of commercialism, speaking only in obnoxious slang, ignoring or disrespecting the few adults around. The future is vapid and without direction. Yet many teens will feel a haunting familiarity about this future universe” (Booklist). The rampant commercialism of the book is juxtaposed with political unrest to weave a satirically cautionary tale that is reminiscent of earlier

dystopic novels like *1984*. At its best, *Feed* is a revolutionary call to arms in defense of independent critical thought, at its worst, it is a depressing glimpse of a very possible future.

NOTE: The audiobook of *Feed* read by David Aaron Baker won the Audiofile Earphones Award and made the YALSA Selected Audiobooks for Young Adults list in 2004.



Awards: *Finalist* 2002 National Book Award for Young People's Literature - *Winner* 2003 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Fiction - *Winner* 2003 Golden Duck Awards Hal Clement Award for Young Adults - *Nominee* 2005-2006 Green Mountain Book Award

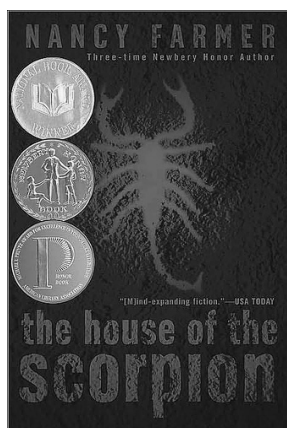
Burgess, Melvin. *Bloodtide*. Toronto: Simon Pulse, 2007

A unique mix between of a futuristic London, Arthurian legend, Icelandic sagas and other medieval stories is the setting for *Bloodtide*. London is filled with genetically created half-human half-animal slaves and power hungry human rulers. Control of the ruined city is at the centre of a war between two gangs, the Conors and the Volsons. An attempt is made to unite the gangs by marrying Signy, the 14-year-

old daughter of the Volson ruler, to the “King” of the Conors. Signy must decide which is the worse fate: marrying the enemy or defying her father. But when Conor murders Signy’s father, she turns to cold fury “I’ll open my legs to him with a smile... If I have to bear his children, I’ll do that too, just so I can slit their throats before his eyes.” Love, death, betrayal and revenge are the main themes of this dystopian

retelling of the Icelandic saga of the Volsungs. The final struggle is between that of madness and learning how to be truly human. Burgess does not shy away from graphic scenes of sex and violence. Told from several points of view, this novel may be too complex for some readers but its power, dialogue and characters make it well worth the effort.

Bloodsong, a companion more than a sequel, follows Sigurd, another Volson who has been genetically designed to be a hero and has been sent off to slay an engineered dragon. The story is tighter than *Bloodtide*, taking place over a shorter period of time, but told much in the same way.



Farmer, Nancy. *The House of the Scorpion*. Toronto: Simon Pulse, 2004.

The dystopia of the House of the Scorpion is more subtle than many of the other books that we have included in our lists. The book takes place in the country of Opium, which is made up of part of the southern United States and northern Mexico. It is a land ruled by drug lords who made a deal to stop the flow of people between the US and Mexico if they were given

the freedom to do whatever they want. Opium is ruled by El Patrón, Matteo Alacrán, a 140 year old man who rules his family with an iron fist. We are introduced to this world through the eyes of Matt, a clone of El Patrón. Matt has to learn what he is, what this means and how his world works. Matt struggles through the truths of Opium, its slave labour force and

why clones exist. This book shows how often places that seem perfect are in fact fatally flawed. Farmer manages to explore two distinct dystopian environments within this novel. At the end we know that Matt did what needed to be done but we are left unsure of if or how the world will improve.

Awards: ALA Michael L. Printz Award, 2003 - ALA Newbery Honor Book, 2003 - ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young - Adults National Book Award Winner, 2002

Mac, Carrie. *The Droughtlanders*. Toronto: Puffin Canada, 2006.

Using the traditional dystopic theme of class struggle, Carrie Mac sets brother against brother in this first book of the Triskelia trilogy. Seth and Eli Maddox are twins who were born and raised in the elite Eastern Key – a walled city that protects the populace from the filth and disease of the world outside the walls. Keylanders, as the

elite are called, are a privileged upper class. The Droughtlanders, struggling to survive in the arid space between walled cities, comprise the lower class. Class distinctions drive a wedge between Seth and Eli when Seth joins the Keylander army to fight against the Droughtlanders and Eli begins a quest to find the legendary home of the

Droughtlander rebels – Triskelia. While Eli searches for truth, Seth begins a mission of his own – killing his brother. In a story richly underscored by contemporary social realism, and combining romance, adventure, and fantasy, *The Droughtlanders* firmly sets the stage for this trilogy to unfold.



Author Spotlight: Monica Hughes



Monica Hughes has written over 30 books for young adults mainly in the science fiction and fantasy genres. Her tendency to keep a positive tone is seen by critics as giving a uniquely softer edge to her fictions than other sci-fi writers. Hughes' writing is well known for well paced narratives, well-rounded characters, and rich undertones of symbolism. She was made a member of the Order of Canada in 2002.

Among her dystopic novels are: *The Tomorrow City* (1978), *Beyond the Dark River* (1979), *Ring-rise, Ring-set* (1983), *Devil on my Back* (1984), *The Dream Catcher* (1986), *Invitation to the Game* (1991), *The Crystal Drop* (1993), *The Other Place* (1999)

"Hughes, Monica (Lindsay)." *In Continuum Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. 2005. Retrieved April 07, 2007, from <http://www.xreferplus.com/entry/5659788>

"Hughes, Monica 1925-." *In The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English*. 2001. Retrieved April 07, 2007, from <http://www.xreferplus.com/entry/5708946>

Westerfeld, Scott. *Uglies*. Toronto: Simon Pulse, 2005.

Uglies is the first installment of a trilogy that includes *Uglies*, *Pretties* and *Specials*, although Scott Westerfeld's blog mentions a fourth book in this series, *Extras*, which will be released in October 2007. These books are well written and captivating. The primary story of each book is self-contained but the endings always draw you onto the next story. As you explore each of the books you are given more information about the how the city and the world works.

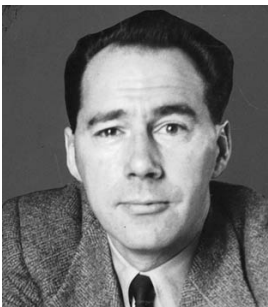
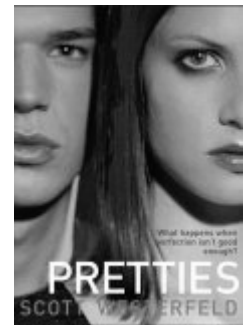
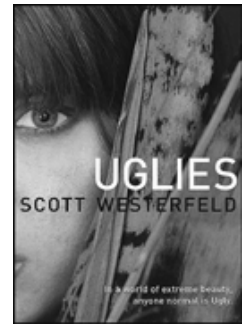
The series take place about 300 hundred years in the future. The world as we know it known as "Rusty" society, was destroyed when an engineered bacteria was released that caused oil and gas to explode when in contact with air. The new world is very different, with self-

contained cities existing all over the continents each with its own ways of living. In *Uglies* we are introduced to Tally who lives in a city where everyone gets an operation at the age of 16 to make them Pretty. Becoming Pretty is more than just cosmetic surgery you become perfectly symmetrical, immune to almost all disease, have your teeth replaced with ceramic and more. Tally can't wait to turn, but while she is waiting, she meets Shay. Shay lives in a different dorm but they become friends waiting for their shared birthday. Shay challenges Tally, teaching her to hoverboard and discussing the operation in a less-than-positive way. Just before it is their birthday, Shay reveals that she wants to run away. Shay knows people who have left the city

and gone into the "wild", people who have stayed Ugly forever. The idea of living Ugly horrifies Tally, and she stays behind as Shay ventures out into the "wild". That is when Tally meets the Special Circumstances, or Specials. Specials are perfection taken to terrifying extremes: they are fast, smart, vicious and unstoppable. The Specials tell Tally that she must track her friend in the wild and find the rebel camp. Only if she betrays Shay can she ever turn Pretty.

Throughout the series we follow Shay and Tally as they learn about their world, betray each other, and try to understand what is important in life.

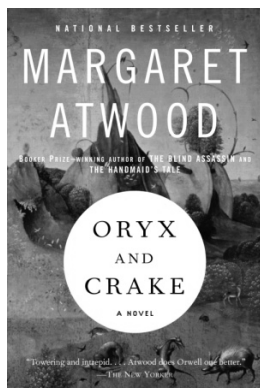
Awards: School Library Journal Best Books of the Year 2005 - ALA Best Books for Young Adults - VOYA - Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers - NYPL "Books for the Teen Age"



Author Spotlight: John Wyndham (1903-1969)

John Wyndham is known for his realistic, post-apocalyptic science fiction novels. He viewed what he wrote as "intelligent" science fiction, that is, science fiction that could plausibly occur, which was a reaction against the Romantic "science fantasy" of H.G. Wells and others. His stories quite often rely on character and relationships within the science-fiction framework, rather than relying on the science fiction element.

Wyndham's most famous works include *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), *The Kraken Wakes* (1953), and *The Chrysalids* (1955).

Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx & Crake*. Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 2003

Margaret Atwood pushes dystopia as far as it will go in *Oryx & Crake*. No stone is unturned in this post-apocalyptic narrative – science, technology, religion, politics, and commercialism are all targets to be hit. The story is told in flashbacks by Snowman as he physically and mentally travels back to the place where his role in the apocalypse became

clear. Beginning with his own childhood as Jimmy, Snowman recounts his friendship with Crake from the time they were young boys to Crake's chilling final days of madness. Ironically, what adults criticize about *Oryx & Crake* are what make it very accessible to young adults. Teens will be intrigued by the quirky and imaginative details and overlook occasional

lapses in writing style; they will recognize the many parables contained in the novel without finding them too overt. For these reasons, it is an ideal crossover novel.

Awards: NOMINEE 2004 - Orange Prize for Fiction - NOMINEE 2003 - Man Booker Prize - NOMINEE 2003 - Scotiabank Giller Prize - FINALIST 2003 - Governor General's Literary Awards - Fiction

Barry, Max. *Jennifer Government*. New York: Vintage, 2004

The governments of the world no longer have any power. The real power lies in the corporations. People are now named after the places where they work, like Hack Nike or Jennifer Government. Nike marketers recently had ten people who bought the new Mercury shoes killed to show how hot and scarce the

shoes really are. But the corporation couldn't get their hands dirty, so they hired the police, who are available to the highest bidder and cheaper than the NRA. It is Jennifer Government's task to decipher the mystery of these murders. More of a fun romp than a dark warning, this novel should still spark

discussion of privatization and the power of corporations.

Awards: WINNER - Booklist Editor's Choice for Young Adults - WINNER - School Library Journal Adult Books for Young Adults

**Author Spotlight: William Gibson (1948 -)**

William Gibson is considered the father of cyberpunk dystopia – a blend of complex technology and street culture set in a bleak capitalist society imploding in the face of rampant commercialization, technological frenzies, and globalization.

Gibson's best-known works of cyberpunk dystopia are the Sprawl Trilogy: *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988).

Classics *Recommended for ages 15 +*



Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: Seal Books, 1998

The Handmaid's Tale is often cited as the first feminist dystopian novel. Atwood shows a world in which women have absolutely no power. Gilead is a military dictatorship that took power and eliminated the rights of women to own property and have their own money or voice. Combined with this is the fact that pollution has rendered much of the population infertile, making a fertile woman a valuable

commodity. Women are slotted into very specific jobs: domestics, wives, handmaids and unwomen. All of the women regardless of status are tightly controlled. The story is told from the point of view of Offred (Of Fred) a handmaid just beginning her position at a Commander's house. We learn through her about the training of the handmaids and the rituals surrounding the

bearing of children. Flashbacks give us glimpses into what the world used to be, the world we recognize. Unlike other dystopian novels the unrest of the factions is much nearer the surface; you hear rumblings of it throughout the novel. This does not make Offred's attempts to break free any less desperate or dangerous.

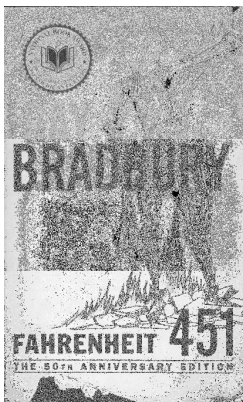
Author Spotlight: Chuck Palahniuk (1962 -)

Chuck Palahniuk writes scathing social commentaries from which no topic is safe. His dystopia is unique, as it does not borrow heavily from science fiction or fantasy and he often chooses to set his stories in the present time – pushing trends to dangerous extremes to create a portrait of contemporary dystopia that borders on horror. His works are only suggested for very mature readers (16+) due to their highly disturbing content.

Palahniuk's best-known works are *Fight Club* (1996), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Survivor* (1999), and *Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey* (2007).



Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Del Rey, 1987.



The repression of literature is a common theme in dystopic literature, as it represents intellectual repression more generally. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* picks up on the contemporary trend of censorship and extrapolates it to an extreme degree to demonstrate the consequences of such oppression.

In a futuristic setting where the threat of nuclear war is ever-present, the story is focused on Guy Montag, a fireman dedicated to burning books. After a series of events forces Montag to re-evaluate his life and question the value of his work, he becomes committed to preserving, rather than destroy-

ing, works of literature. He ultimately abandons the city and joins with The Book People, who are dedicated to memorizing literature so it may be reproduced at a future date. Unlike most classic dystopia, *Fahrenheit 451* ends with a glimmer of hope that appeals to a younger audience.

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. London: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006



The world which Aldous Huxley creates is very detailed but very different from our own. Children are no longer born but grown, and the amount of food and care given to these fetuses depends on the social class of the person. Each class has specific tasks to accomplish,

and through medication and mind control each group think that they are the luckiest group in the world. Family and relationships have been abolished and hedonism is the motivation for most actions. It is into this strange world that the savage comes. John the Savage was born in

the “natural” way on a reservation. Huxley contrasts the life on the reservations and that in the World State, showing the reader the problems of a possible utopia where all physical needs are met but where life is static.

Orwell, George. *1984*. Toronto: Signet Books, 1977.

Considered one of the classics of dystopian literature, *1984* has attracted a young adult audience since its publication in 1949. The novel imagines a world made up of three totalitarian superpowers who are always at war. One of these superpowers, Oceania, is governed by a group called the Party that is led by Big Brother.

Winston Smith is the main character in this work, and the plot revolves around his rebellion against the Party. Together with his illicit lover, Winston slowly increases his resistance to Party doctrine. Thinking they have found the perfect underground movement, Winston and Julia join the Brotherhood with the hope of learning the truth

about the Party. The Brotherhood turns out to be an agent of the Party, however, and Winston and Julia are arrested, separated, and re-integrated into society through a process of torture and brainwashing. Originally written as a cautionary tale, *1984* continues to provide relevant social commentary on contemporary issues.



Rand, Ayn. *Anthem*. Toronto: Signet Books, 1996



Drawing heavily on her own experiences of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Ayn Rand attacks the socialist thinking and economics that led to what she considered a second dark-age where individuality and progress were repressed. In *Anthem*, a young man called Equality 7-2521 struggles against his desire to be a scholar in or-

der to better conform to the anti-individualistic society he lives in. Despite repeated attempts to embrace conformity and become a small part of the whole, Equality 7-2521 cannot contain his intelligence and his individualism and he continues to study in his underground hiding spot until he is caught and arrested. Eager to share

his discovery of electricity with the World Council of Scholars, he breaks out of prison only to be rejected and feared by them. To protect his light bulb he flees the city, followed by his true love, and together they learn about the concept of ‘I’ and vow to raise children who will be individuals.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. New York: Modern Library, 2006

Available in a number of translations, the most recent edition translated by Natasha Randall is praised for the exploration of Zamyatin's influences beyond Communism. Written in the 1920s, this first dystopian novel is credited as an inspiration for Orwell and Huxley and the beginning of the genre. In *We* there are no individuals, just

the One State and the Benefactor, people are known only as numbers and live in glass houses. The story is told through the eyes of D-503, a mathematician who is working on the State's mission to outer space. He has decided to record the time around this momentous event in his diary for the enlightenment of base

cultures. D-503 keeps seeing I-330, a woman, and his world is turned upside down by his desire for her. Enslaved by this desire, D-503 gets his first taste of freedom. This classic is often overlooked in favour of Huxley or Orwell, but it deserves to be rediscovered.



Author Spotlight: Philip Kindred Dick



Award winning Philip K. Dick a prolific writer of science fiction who grew up in the Berkeley counter culture. His works often deal with the effects of mechanization of the world and the creation of androids. He also explores themes of perception though mind-control, drug

use, and delusions. His writings have remained gripping reads often laced with humour.

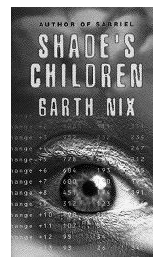
Among his many dystopic novels are *Solar Lottery* (1955), *Eye in the Sky* (1957), *Vulcan's Hammer* (1960), *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), *The Penultimate Truth* (1964), *Lies, Inc.* (1964). Dick has also written many short stories including *The Minority Report* (1956).

Website: <http://www.philipkdick.com/>

"Dick, Philip K(indred)". In *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* 3rd edition. 2006. Retrieved April 06, 2007, from <http://www.xreferplus.com/entry/6010321>

"Dick, Philip K(indred) 1928 - 1982." In *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*. 2003. Retrieved April 06, 2007, from <http://www.xreferplus.com/entry/5665807>

Teen Review: *Shade's Children* by David Anderson, 17



Garth Nix's *Shade's Children* is a science fiction thriller set in a world where anyone over the age of fourteen is used for parts in vicious and unthinking cyborgs created by foul beings known as Overlords. The book follows a group of children – Ella, Drum, Ninde and Gold-Eye – who have escaped this fate and are working under the guidance of the computerized memory of an old scientist who now goes by the name of Shade.

Shade's Children is above all a thriller; it contains a good deal of action that is expertly described by Nix. Unfortunately with such a focus on action we see little character development, except in the character of Shade. There is little difference between the start and end of the book as far as personalities are concerned. There is a romantic relation between Ninde and Gold-Eye but it does little to change the characters and has the feel of being tacked on.

The plot is straightforward and even though Nix attempted to add a bit of intrigue and mystery the end result is unsurprising. It is also difficult to immerse oneself in the world of *Shade's Children*, there is little explanation concerning the origins of the Overlords or their motives for creating the world described in the novel. The reader's inability to have a feel for the world the book is set in is particularly damaging, as this is an important element for books in the science fiction genre. While *Shade's Children* is a mildly entertaining read it is far from deep or thought provoking. Provided you do not expect anything particularly moving or intricate it is an enjoyable book, but the reader is still left with the sensation that it could have been so much more.

Nix, Garth. *Shade's Children*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998.