

Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction

Bestseller and teen choice lists of the last few years have seen numerous dystopian novels in their ranks—from the Hunger Games series to the Matched trilogy and numerous stand-alone titles. Tapping into a long tradition in literature hallmarked by works such as Orwell’s *1984* and Huxley’s *Brave New World*, dystopian fiction seems to have found a home in the growing body of young adult (YA) literature. The rising popularity of dystopian fiction for teens has attracted even the attention of the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* (Miller, 2010; Bacigalupi, et al., 2010). While dystopian works have been a part of YA literature since Lowry’s *The Giver* and Sleator’s *House of Stairs*, they have experienced a resurgent popularity in the past few years.

As classroom teachers, we are constantly on the watch for books we can recommend to our students, so trends such as these matter to us. We want to be able to suggest good titles for our students to read outside of class, and we’re interested in finding strong YA novels to study in the classroom. The popularity of dystopian novels attracted our attention, so we set out to investigate this phenomenon, seeking to understand why teens found this genre so compelling and how we might take advantage of this in the classroom.

Defining Dystopia

The concept of dystopia arose in the 20th century in response to such world events as the First World War, according to literary scholar Gregory Claeys (2010). As a counter to earlier fictional utopias (depictions of idealized societies that promise a glorious future),

dystopian fiction instead satirizes utopian ideals or describes societies where negative social forces have supremacy. Hintz and Ostry (2003), writing specifically about children’s literature, define dystopias as societies where “the ideals for improvement have gone tragically amok” (p. 3). A major premise of classic dystopian works is that humanity is the cause of its own nightmarish situation. Whatever has run “amok”—government, technology, commercialization—society as a whole is to blame because of incompetence, consent, or complacency. Our study yielded some common elements in dystopian literature (see Fig. 1), revealing a core of heavy and provocative themes. Previously, this kind of literature was written for an adult audience, those presumed to understand the intricacies of social, political, and moral issues.

Common Elements in Dystopian Literature

- Excessive measures to police society; unjust laws
- Pressure to conform
- Media manipulation and propaganda
- Measures to cover up flaws and lies within society
- Attempts to erase or revise society’s history
- Suppression of the arts
- Limited or complete lack of individual freedom
- Division of people into privileged and unprivileged groups
- Little hope for change
- Human lives that are rote, meaningless, or inhuman
- Economic manipulation
- Flawed, misunderstood, or abused advances (science, technology)
- Suppression of emotions

Figure 1.

The recent explosion in dystopian literature for young adults interests us, in large part because these new titles include similar themes and conventions as classic works in this genre. Recent titles, though, are aimed squarely at a new audience (teens) and are enjoying strong success. To understand the nature of this phenomenon, we looked critically at a number of recent titles and found compelling reasons for the surge in popularity of dystopian works among adolescent readers.

Our Process

In trying to uncover what about these books might explain their rising popularity, we selected a handful of the most popular or best-written books. We began by looking only at those books that had been written recently (since 2000), and then narrowing the possibilities to a manageable set by selecting titles that had appeared on both bestseller and awards lists or teen choice lists. Some titles were selected in an effort

Table 1. List of titles studied and prominent elements for classroom analysis

| | Platonic or Romantic Relationship | Excessive Measures to Police Society | Pressure to Conform | Media Manipulation and Propaganda |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Across the Universe</i> (2011) by Beth Revis | X | | | |
| <i>Birthmarked</i> (2010) by Caragh M. O'Brien | X | X | | |
| <i>Bumped</i> (2011) by Megan McCafferty | X | | X | X |
| <i>The Declaration</i> (2007) by Gemma Malley | X | X | | |
| <i>Divergent</i> (2011) by Veronica Roth | X | X | X | |
| <i>Enclave</i> (2011) by Ann Aguirre | | X | X | |
| <i>Epitaph Road</i> (2011) by David Patneaude | | X | | |
| <i>Feed</i> (2002) by M.T. Anderson | X | | X | X |
| The Hunger Games series (2008, 2009, 2010) by Suzanne Collins | X | X | | X |
| <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> (2008) by Patrick Ness | | X | | |
| <i>The Line</i> (2010) by Teri Hall | | X | | |
| <i>Little Brother</i> (2008) by Cory Doctorow | | X | | X |
| <i>Matched</i> (2010) by Ally Condie | X | X | X | |
| <i>Uglies</i> (2005) by Scott Westerfeld | X | X | X | |
| <i>The Unidentified</i> (2010) by Rae Mariz | | X | X | X |
| <i>Unwind</i> (2007) by Neal Shusterman | | X | | |

to give a greater cross section of the genre (e.g., some titles were chosen for the gender of their protagonist or the nature of the setting). We ended up with a list of 16 titles, including some series books, that we felt represented some of the most popular and well-written titles of the past decade. (See Table 1 for the complete list.)

We next set about reading these titles, recording our observations about which elements in the novels seemed significant and might help explain the ap-

peal. During this reading phase, we met together and compared notes; from these notes, we started to build a sense of the patterns and trends. As we finished each title, we reviewed the book in light of these patterns and sought to substantiate these in the context of other books on the list we had finished reading. Once we had read all of the selected titles, we met and discussed the specific elements we had identified and tried to bring out some larger, encompassing themes into which these more specific elements

| Measures to Cover Up Flaws and Lies in Society | Attempts to Erase or Revise Society's History | Limited or Complete Lack of Individual Freedom | People Divided into Groups | Flawed or Abused Advances in Technology |
|--|---|--|----------------------------|---|
| X | | | X | X |
| X | | | X | |
| | | | X | |
| | | X | X | |
| X | | | X | |
| | | | | |
| X | X | | | X |
| | | | | X |
| X | | X | X | |
| X | X | X | | |
| X | X | X | | |
| X | | X | | |
| X | | | | |
| X | | X | X | X |
| | | | X | |
| | | X | X | X |

could fit. We noted, for instance, that efforts in these books to strictly police society or to suppress the arts or to create divisions into privileged and unprivileged groups could fit under a larger theme of the society's inhumanity; likewise, it was these same elements that often motivated a protagonist to acknowledge his or

her responsibility to take some action in restoring humanity to the community, which led us to an encompassing theme of agency. At the end of this process, we arrived at overarching common themes of inhumanity and isolation, agency and conscience, and relationships (romantic and otherwise).

The results of our analysis started us thinking that these books fulfill a

special role for teenagers, given their unique situation straddling childhood and adulthood. Some of the first connections we made were related to understandings of adolescent development, and these helped explain some of the popularity of these titles. We also looked at specific literary elements within these books and examined their impact. Finally, we considered what these findings might suggest for us as teachers, and how the conclusions we reached through this study might inform classroom practice.

Adolescent Development and Dystopian Literature

The setting, themes, and characters in dystopian fiction are an appropriate fit with the intellectual changes that occur during adolescence. As adolescents develop, they are able to grasp bigger, more abstract concepts and consequences in the world around them and can engage in more critical thinking; they also show increasing interest in issues related to society at large (Larson & Richards, 1994; Steinberg, 2005). Dystopian novels that wrestle with deeper societal and moral issues are often well received by young minds that are developing the ability and even willingness to grapple with complex ideas.

As teens approach adulthood, they begin paying

more attention to the structures and systems that lie ahead. This includes career possibilities and lifestyle choices, but also more abstract systems such as moral standards and social norms. Morally, adolescents are moving from the black-and-white view of children toward the more nuanced view of adults, and the large number of significant transitions they experience can lead to uncertainty about their identities and futures (Kerig, Schulz, & Hauser, 2011; Steinberg, 2005). This uncertainty and questioning is part of the process through which teenagers develop their own set of values. Dystopian fiction features protagonists who are likewise questioning the underlying values of a flawed society and their identity within it—who they are going to be and how they are going to act. Every choice the characters make can carry enormous consequences, often to the point of significantly altering the world they've always known. Teenagers connect with these protagonists as they feel a similar weight on their shoulders.

Specific Elements That Appeal to Teens

The connections between adolescent development and dystopian fiction highlight certain patterns that emerged from our analysis of these titles. While not every book we read featured every element described here, these books collectively represent significant themes and motifs that dominate the dystopian literature being published and read today. Based on our analysis and experience as teachers in secondary schools, these themes have a certain appeal to teenagers and also offer a wealth of material for classroom study. To supplement our own analysis, Justin queried some of his seventh- and eighth-grade students about the reasons they found these books appealing; we've included some of their responses in the following discussion.

Inhumanity and Isolation

Whatever the backdrop of the dystopia—a violent society, a tyrannical government, an over-commercialized world—the protagonists come to understand that their society has become inhumane. They are appalled by the attitudes and actions of those within their culture, sickened at the complacency and even the open coldness of others toward situations that are cruel and unjust. As protagonists awaken to the realities around

The results of our analysis started us thinking that these books fulfill a special role for teenagers, given their unique situation straddling childhood and adulthood.

them, they feel an overwhelming sense that life has lost the value that it once had in the world—respect for life has been sacrificed for comfort or security. In YA dystopian novels, it is often this inhumanity that pushes the protagonists to action. The students in Justin’s classes, when asked how these books connected to our own society, commented that the government doesn’t take care of people in many of these books and that those in power tend to categorize people in arbitrary ways, thus creating unnecessary divisions.

In the book *Birthmarked* (O’Brien, 2010), Gaia has been training to be a midwife, just like her mother. At the start of the novel, she helps deliver a baby, then dutifully takes that newborn from its mother’s arms and gives it to the authorities. But the desperate pleas of the newborn’s mother echo in her mind, and she begins to question the authorities’ actions. These doubts, along with the mysterious disappearance of her parents, lead her to sneak into the Enclave (the seat of power) in search of answers. Once inside, she sees (in light of her training as a midwife) the epitome of inhumanity—the execution of a husband and his full-term pregnant wife for defying society’s strict mating laws. This is a defining point for Gaia, and she becomes determined to follow her own sense of right and wrong, despite the laws of the Enclave.

At the opening of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), Katniss is clearly aware of the injustices around her. To this point in her life, however, she has learned how to survive within them, and has no real thoughts of changing things. When her younger sister Prim is randomly selected as a tribute for the violent yearly games, however, the cruelty of the authorities becomes personal. Katniss’s experiences in the Hunger Games fuel her disgust at what life in her society has become—bohemian at the capitol, impoverished in the districts—and how the Games are used to control and intimidate otherwise innocent people. She is enraged at the utter enthusiasm many have for the violent Hunger Games, and arguably more enraged by the complacent attitude that prevails everywhere else. When she sees how cheap life has become, she is pushed over the edge and resolves to do whatever she can to change things.

While today’s teens mature in societies that aren’t nearly as cruel or twisted as those frequently described in dystopian texts, these protagonists’ growing understanding of the society around them mirrors

important growth taking place for teen readers. As protagonists in dystopian YA literature come to recognize the truth about the societies they live in, they often feel alone, separated from family and friends who do not share the same realizations. As a result, one of the conflicts they face is deciding whom they can trust with their understandings of their society’s flaws and with their plans to take corrective action.

In *Little Brother* (Doctorow, 2008), Marcus returns from his ordeal at the hands of an emboldened Homeland Security force, now aware of deep flaws in the society, flaws that his parents are unwilling or unable to see. Arguments with his father heighten Marcus’s sense of isolation, and even the friends who were incarcerated with him and know firsthand of the abuses eventually drift away from him, unwilling to pursue dangerous action against the society. Conor’s separation is clear at the beginning of *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007), when his parents sign the papers to have him unwound (sent to have his organs harvested), but he grows close to Risa as the two of them seek escape from the authorities. Once in the relative safety of the Graveyard, however, Conor’s growing awareness of dark truths in the society distance him from Risa and push him into further separation, even from the society of his fellow Unwinds.

Feelings of isolation, of course, are not unusual for today’s teenage readers. Social issues, such as finding a place and fitting in, take on increasing importance for teenagers (Kerig, Schulz, & Hauser, 2011), and they worry about maintaining friendships and romantic relationships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011). And while teens may be connected, on one level, with many friends through social networks and other technologies, such connections may not be as satisfying or as fulfilling as face-to-face relationships (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Turkle, 2011), even though teens would not likely admit this possibility. Further, the choices teens begin to make about studies, extracurricular activities, and careers may distance them from formerly close friends. They find kindred

These protagonists’ growing understanding of the society around them mirrors important growth taking place for teen readers.

spirits, then, in the protagonists of dystopian literature who, by virtue of their growing awareness of society's flaws, find themselves similarly isolated from adults and even from their own peers.

Katy, from *The Unidentified* (Mariz, 2010), is one such protagonist. In her highly competitive society, where becoming Branded (sponsored by a corporation) assures you a comfortable existence, she has formed a tight bond with two other teens who share her musical interests, Ari and Mikey. Katy is increasingly suspicious of Branding, and as Ari becomes increasingly aggressive about pursuing Branding, she

and Katy begin to drift apart. Katy takes refuge in her relationship with Mikey, but once Katy herself becomes Branded, her relationship with him becomes strained. Becoming an insider to the Branding culture exposes Katy to more and more flaws in the society, a knowledge she can't share with Ari or Mikey because they remain blind to society's imperfections. The more Katy

understands about the truth of this society, the more adrift she feels in a confusing and potentially dangerous world and the less connected she becomes to her previous friends. The dynamics of her friendships will seem familiar ground to many teenage readers, and they can likely find comfort in reading their own confusions and sense of loneliness reflected in Katy's emotions.

Agency and Conscience: The Brink of Adulthood

Most YA novels feature a protagonist who is faced with challenges, external or internal, and who must overcome those challenges as part of coming of age or establishing an identity. Dystopian YA novels feature a similar motif, with the challenges faced often arising from the failures of society. Katniss Everdeen, in Collins's Hunger Games trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), faces physical challenges in the form of the Games, but she must also deal with internal moral dilemmas as she questions the actions she's taken to preserve her life and family in the arena. These questions become even

more problematic as, in later books in the series, she is exploited as a standard-bearer for the revolt against President Snow and the corrupt government of the twelve districts. Cassia, in Condie's *Matched* (2010), must wrestle with her confused feelings for Ky, a boy with whom she has not been romantically matched per the society's optimal, algorithmic calculations. Pursuing a relationship with Ky would not only run counter to the society's strict regulations and place her future in jeopardy, but it might also bring about negative consequences for her family. While she feels attracted to her approved match, Xander, her attraction to Ky is qualitatively different and forces her to make significant choices about what path she will pursue within the society.

In the context of challenges such as these, dystopian fiction for young adults describes protagonists who reach a realization about their role in the larger society: they come to see themselves as agents, individuals with a will (often in sharp contrast to the will of the society) and with the capacity to not only disagree with prevailing opinions but to act out against them. The words of the Dylan Thomas poem that sound throughout *Matched*, "Do not go gentle into that good night," embody this growing sense of the potential to act. In Cassia's refusal to take the anxiety-reducing green pill that all members of her community carry, she demonstrates an understanding that she cannot be a passive member of the society. Holding on to the scrap of paper with the Thomas poem, learning to write by hand, kissing Ky—these are subtle acts of resistance that demonstrate Cassia's growing sense of agency. In her final decision in *Matched*, to leave in search of Ky and cut her ties for good with the Society, she embraces her role as agent, recognizing that what she's doing is bigger than just wanting to be with the one she loves. As she says to Xander, "Because it's about making our own choices. That's the point, isn't it? This is bigger than us now" (p. 356).

The protagonist's growing sense of the potential to act against society is a common characteristic of the YA dystopian fiction we examined. A striking example comes from Anna, the young girl in *The Declaration* (Malley, 2007), a book about a society that strictly limits population expansion. Anna has been harshly conditioned to see herself as unwanted and a drain on the world's resources—she is a Surplus. Once she's

made the decision to flee Granger House, where she and all the other Surpluses are kept isolated, she has to find a way to end up in solitary confinement so she can escape the House. She does so by arguing publicly with one of her teachers about the unfairness of denying people of her class the same longevity drugs other enjoy. As she puts into concrete words the doubts that she's been having, she "experiences her first taste of challenging the doctrine, and it was absolutely delicious" (p. 151). The change Anna experiences in this book is, perhaps, the most radical of all these dystopian novels. She begins the story completely indoctrinated, convinced of the appropriateness of her unfair treatment, but after Peter opens her mind and plants seeds of doubt, she begins to not only see the flaws in the society, but to embrace her role as an actor with the ability to choose how she acts within that society.

This notion of a protagonist's agency mirrors teens' own growing sense of their role as agents in a larger community, and explains in part the appeal of dystopian fiction to so many young people. Young children may blindly accept authority and follow the "rules" laid down by parents and other authority figures; as teenagers transition to adults, however, they are expected to take on more responsibility and to make more independent choices. High school juniors and seniors, for example, are making significant choices about post-high school education and career options. As the adolescent psychologist Steinberg (2005) explains, these increasingly adult roles "stimulate the development of independent decision-making abilities and the clarification of personal values" (p. 300). As teens' awareness of society's conventions and expectations gradually solidifies, they see their own potential as actors within the society. They come to recognize their own power as manifest in the choices they make about which career to pursue or what kinds of relationships they'll form. The protagonists in dystopian literature ring true with teens' own experiences, and with their growing sense of self as agent and as bearer of the responsibility for their actions. The teens that Justin interviewed echoed this idea, explaining that part of why they liked these books is because they are driven by the main characters' personalities; the exercise of agency and responsibility certainly plays a role in these characters' strengths.

This awareness of one's own agency as well as one's responsibility for the consequences of choices

is eloquently portrayed at the end of the novel *Across the Universe* (Revis, 2011). In destroying the pumping system that delivered a sedative-like drug to the residents of the spaceship he lives in, Elder has freed them to feel emotions once again. But by the end of the book, it's clear that he has doubts about this path of action and is worried about governing a society that is truly free to feel and think and act as its members wish. These are frightening choices he faces, and the consequences of those choices are significant, a fact that Elder seems to only fully realize once the decision has already been made.

Similarly, teenagers stand on the cusp of significant choices with life-altering consequences; there is little doubt that such choices will make them feel anxious and uncertain. It is likely comforting, then, to see this uncertainty in Elder or in Cassia as she ponders what the Society might do to her family if she leaves to find Ky. Seeing their own concerns and worries mirrored in these characters must help teens feel that they are not alone, and may even give them the courage to face those difficult choices and their consequences, much as do the protagonists of these dystopian works.

Relationships: Platonic and Romantic

The protagonists of YA dystopias gradually develop a sense of agency and potential influence as they become aware of the flaws in their society. While this growing awareness can isolate them from others around them, the actions they take and even their increased understanding of the truth are often aided by a relationship of some kind with another character in the story. This relationship, sometimes romantic, provides a catalyst for both the protagonist's changing perceptions about the society and his or her willingness to take action that runs counter to the conventions of that society.

In M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), for instance, the disruption of Titus's "feed" (a constant Internet connection linked directly into the brain) certainly causes upheaval in his life. But it's his relationship with Violet that really forces Titus to reevaluate the

This notion of a protagonist's agency mirrors teens' own growing sense of their role as agents in a larger community.

role that the feed has played in defining who he is and what he wants out of life. The attraction he feels for Violet stems, in part at least, from her nontraditional lifestyle; the time he spends with her encourages him to explore the implications of a consumerist society with its tentacles, literally, in every space of his mind. For Marcus, in *Little Brother*, subversive action against the powers-that-be comes easily, almost immediately

These relationships, romantic and platonic, serve to actually shape [protagonists] thinking about the society around them.

after he is released from custody. In the process of taking his initial actions to a level where the resistance will be more organized, he meets Ange, a girl who shares similar distrust of the government. While Ange doesn't open Marcus's eyes the way Violet does Titus's, she does give him the courage to take increasingly public action, as in the case of the press

conference Marcus holds, and supports him as he eventually goes public with the story of his abuse at the hands of a government institution. In *The Declaration*, Mrs. Princent, the cruel House Matron who ensures that the Surpluses are tightly controlled, recognizes the potential dangers a romantic relationship can bring when she promises herself to "beat any idea of romance out of Anna" (p. 154).

Friendships, and especially romantic relationships, expose the protagonists to differing opinions and perceptions of life. This could clearly be dangerous to those in a dystopian society who want a strict status quo, where all think alike and fulfill a given role. In *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (Ness, 2008), Todd, a young man growing up in a society where all women were killed by a mysterious virus, provides a strong example of this. He encounters a teen girl, Viola, brought to Todd's planet by a spaceship that has crashed near his home, and her arrival causes no small disturbance in his society—a disturbance that reveals to Todd the first cracks in his society. Viola's very different perspective from a distant world helps Todd begin to see important truths about his world, and his relationship with Viola—displaying elements of both friendship and romance—drives him to take previously unthought-of actions in her defense as he

tries to protect her from men who would exploit or kill her to keep dark secrets hidden.

Romance and friendships are, not surprisingly, elements that teenagers are quite interested in. The onset of puberty and its accompanying hormonal changes, as well as shifting societal expectations that encourage boys and girls to see each other in romantic ways, connect with the romantic relationships portrayed in YA fiction. And friendships represent, as already discussed, a significant part of teenagers' sense of identity and self. But in dystopian fiction, these relationships play a more significant role than solely exploring one's sexuality or identity or weathering the ups-and-downs of romantic relationships. These relationships, romantic and platonic, serve to actually shape their thinking about the society around them and even encourage them to take subversive action.

One example of this influence is Condie's Cassia, a young girl who looks forward to her Match Banquet like every other girl and who seems set for a promising career in society. Why, then, does she suddenly decide to break with all conventions in ways that are at first subtle and then more public? Her attraction to Ky seems to give her the permission she needs to take his stories seriously and lends credibility to his suggestions that things in the society are not as they seem to be. By the end of the first book, this attraction gives her the courage to make a decision that is bound to have negative consequences for herself and her family. This is not to dismiss the influence of her grandfather or father, both "closet activists" who we infer have their own questions about the truths promulgated by the society, but it's clear that her attraction to and blossoming romantic relationship with Ky are what drive much of the change in her thinking and what give her the motivation to deviate more and more seriously from society's strictures.

It isn't enough to argue that dystopian fiction is compelling to young adult readers because it depicts romantic and platonic relationships. We would suggest that it is the nature of those relationships as depicted in this genre that speaks to young readers. These books portray honest and authentic relationships; they acknowledge that romantic relationships are not just about exploring physical attraction or sexuality, they are about how becoming intimate with another person can have an impact on the way you see the world, the actions you take, the level of

responsibility you feel toward another person. They confirm that friendships are about more than simply having someone to hang out with, someone with whom to pursue common interests; friends also have a significant impact on the way you see the world and can influence your actions in ways that are positive and negative.

The Place of YA Dystopian Literature in the Classroom

While the patterns that emerged from comparing these titles are interesting to literary geeks like us, they also signal some important implications for teachers and librarians. First and foremost, we see that these novels can withstand serious literary scrutiny, and perhaps deserve a place alongside the study of other classic dystopian pieces such as Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*. In fact, the dystopian pieces we discuss here bear striking similarities to these classics, and studying a YA dystopian novel would certainly provide an effective bridge to a classic piece, as has been suggested in the past by Herz and Gallo (2005) and Joan Kaywell (1993). Students' appreciation for *1984*'s Winston as he becomes aware of what's wrong in his society and of his potential for action will increase as they compare him to Cassia in *Matched* or Todd in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. Likewise, Winston's relationship with Julia will benefit from a character analysis based on examining the relationship between Anna and Peter in *The Declaration*.

We can also look to ways to connect these texts with content from other curricular areas. The novels discussed here provide rich opportunities for discussion about the role government can and should play in our lives, and the responsibility individuals have for ensuring that justice and humanity are preserved by those in power. We could use dystopian literature to build cross-curricular connections between the English class and a Government or Civics course, with a thematic unit exploring the purpose and role that government should play. Connecting events in *Little Brother* to current events related to security, especially in the face of past and potential terrorist attacks, would help students explore the implications of these things for their lives and personal liberties. Similar connections could be built between physics courses and the exploration of space travel in *Across the Universe*, between

geography courses and the ideas of limited natural resources in *The Declaration*, or between debates of abortion policy in current events and the policies depicted in *Unwind*.

The dystopian novel doesn't need to be so close to our reality in order to provide meaningful exploration of significant topics, however: *Birthmarked* and *The Declaration* raise important questions about human rights and the value of a human life; *Unwind* raises similar questions and also explores the rights of teenagers to make decisions about their future. Issues of free choice—and paying the price for wrong choices—could be explored meaningfully in *Matched*, and the potential negative influences of a consumerist society rest in nearly every chapter of *Feed* and *The Unidentified*.

The richness of many of these novels argues for their study in the ELA classroom, whether independently or coupled with a dystopian classic. Perhaps most compelling, given the broad choices available in this genre, we could consider using dystopian novels in literature circles (see Daniels, 2002). This would allow students to exercise individual choice in selecting a book to study while at the same time allowing for whole-class explorations of these thematic issues and the stylistic elements of the genre.

For teachers and librarians both, we feel strongly that the connections between these novels and teens' lives and concerns argue for a need to showcase these books as we converse with teens about their reading. While the same could be said of most YA literature, dystopian literature seems to speak particularly strongly to teens at this time and to the choices and challenges they face as they move toward adulthood.

Justin Scholes teaches seventh grade language arts in Evanston, Wyoming. He can be reached at jscholes@uintal.com.

Jon Ostenson is an assistant professor at Brigham Young University. He works with preservice teachers and teaches courses in young adult literature. He can be reached at jon_ostenson@byu.edu.

The connections between these novels and teens' lives and concerns argue for a need to showcase these books.

References

- Aguirre, A. (2011). *Enclave*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Anderson, M. T. (2002). *Feed*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Bacigalupi, P., Stiefvater, M., Parini, J., Westerfeld, S., Clements, A., Rowe, L., & Abate, M. A. (2010, December 27). The dark side of young adult fiction. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/12/26/the-dark-side-of-young-adult-fiction>.
- Burke, M., Marlow, C., & Lento, T. (2010). Social network activity and social well-being. *ACM CHI 2010: Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Retrieved from http://www.thoughtcrumbs.com/publications/burke_chi2010_sns_and_wellbeing.pdf.
- Claeys, G. (2010). The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley, and Orwell. In G. Claeys (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature* (pp. 107–131). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, S. (2008). *The hunger games*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Collins, S. (2009). *Catching fire*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Collins, S. (2010). *Mockingjay*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Condie, A. (2010). *Matched*. New York, NY: Dutton Books.
- Connolly, J., & McIsaac, C. (2011). Romantic relationships in adolescence. In L. H. Rosen & M. K. Underwood (Eds.), *Social development: Relationships in infancy, childhood, and adolescence* (pp. 189–190). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Doctorow, C. (2008). *Little brother*. New York, NY: Tor Teen Books.
- Hall, T. (2010). *The line*. New York, NY: Dial Books.
- Herz, S. K., & Gallo, D. R. (2005). *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building bridges between young adult literature and the classics* (2nd ed.). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Hintz, C., & Ostry, E. (2003). *Utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Huxley, A. (1950). *Brave New World*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Kaywell, J. (Ed.). (1993). *Adolescent literature as a complement to the classics*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Kerig, P. K., Schulz, M. S., & Hauser, S. T. (2011). *Adolescence and beyond: Family processes and development*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press.
- Larson, R. W., & Richards, M. H. (1994). Family emotions: Do young adolescents and their parents experience the same states? *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 4, 567–583.
- Lowry, L. (1993). *The Giver*. New York: Random House.
- Malley, G. (2007). *The declaration*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Mariz, R. (2010). *The unidentified*. New York, NY: Balzer & Bray.
- McCafferty, M. (2011). *Bumped*. New York, NY: Balzer & Bray.
- Miller, L. (2010, June 14). Fresh hell: What's behind the boom in dystopian fiction for young readers? *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2010/06/14/100614craat_atlarge_miller.
- Ness, P. (2008). *The knife of never letting go*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
- O'Brien, C. M. (2010). *Birthmarked*. New York, NY: Roaring Brook Press.
- Orwell, G. (1950). *1984*. New York: Signet Classic.
- Patneaude, D. (2011). *Epitaph road*. New York, NY: EgmontUSA.
- Revis, B. (2011). *Across the universe*. New York, NY: Razorbill.
- Roth, V. (2011). *Divergent*. New York, NY: Katherine Tegen Books.
- Shusterman, N. (2007). *Unwind*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Sleator, W. (1991). *House of Stairs*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Steinberg, L. (2005). *Adolescence* (7th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Westerfeld, S. (2005). *Uglies*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse.