

## Getting Up to Speed in Dystopian Fiction

By Mike Nilsson

---

### What is Dystopian Fiction?

Dystopian fiction incorporates elements of science fiction, apocalyptic fiction, and speculative fiction to depict fundamentally broken societies. It shows how humanity has lost its way, whether through misguided good intentions, political repression, exploitation, or invasion by an outside force. Dystopian fiction is most often set in the near future where readers can recognize a twisted version of the present.

Dystopian fiction can also riff on current social problems -- totalitarian governments (*Daughters of the North* by Sarah Hall), harsh theocracies (*When She Woke* by Hillary Jordan), unrestrained capitalism (*The Unincorporated Man* by Dani Kollin) or misused technology (*The Word Exchange* by Alena Graedon). Sometimes set in large cities -- some grimy and dingy, some beautiful and utterly sterile -- or the ravaged, desiccated countryside, dystopian fiction can take place after a pandemic (*Lock In* by John Scalzi), a nuclear war (*Long Voyage Back* by Luke Rhinehart), or an alien invasion (*Conquest: Chronicles of the Invaders* by John Connolly). A recent dystopian fiction trend favors elements of horror (particularly zombies and vampires) and can also be presented as literary fiction (take a look at Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, literary fiction featuring a dystopian zombie-infested America).

These novels usually follow a similar pattern: humans are repressed, exploited, or fighting for survival. Their movements and even thoughts might sometime be controlled through surveillance, drugs, physical restraint, and fear.

### What happens in Dystopian Fiction?

Dystopian fiction can feature a conflict between the individual and the state, a conflict where the protagonist discovers that her society is not as it is presented or as it was originally intended; she consequently sets about attacking the current government or fleeing. Either choice entails serious peril. The state may brutally suppress dissent or forbid emigration and go to great lengths to hunt down those who try to leave.

Another sort of dystopian fiction tale involves a quest, especially in horror and apocalypse-inflected fiction. Whether through a medical disaster (a natural epidemic, a manufactured virus, zombies), total war (usually nuclear), alien invasion (invariably malevolent), severe climate change, or anarchy, cohesive society vanishes, leaving the main characters entirely on their own. Families of convenience and short-term necessity, gangs, or militias often form. These groups are usually unwilling or unable to offer succor or safety to non-members. They embark on a hunt to find a cure

for the malady that ruined their society or their entire civilization. That cure may be a serum or a machine or a safe haven and the journey itself can be the entire point of the novel.

## **Why do people like Dystopian Fiction?**

Dystopian novels offer context, giving readers something to compare their current lives against and the potential realization that life may not be so bad after all. At least they have a clean, well-lighted place to live, probably enough food, and the rule of law. Dystopian fiction also provides readers with a safe way to enjoy intriguing extrapolations of current events, presenting the possible outcomes of corruption, extremism, climate change, or war. Reading about disaster it is generally preferable to living through it. The Germans call it *schadenfreude*, pleasure derived by someone from another person's misfortune.

Many dystopian novels resemble traditional westerns in that their protagonists must stand on their own and fight for their territory or band together against a common enemy. The author will change once-familiar landscapes, values, and technologies just enough for readers to enjoy a new perspective, either on the mundane details of modern life or on an old trope from a different genre. A good dystopian yarn can simply be a great way to escape into a thrilling adventure or to comfortably check out a so-frightening-it's-fun tale of terror.

### **Key titles:**

There are many books with dystopian settings on the market, with new ones published every day. Here is a mixture of outstanding older classics and more recent titles.

#### *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

*Brave New World* envisions a totalitarian state that practices selective breeding, mass conditioning, and obligatory drug use. People are divided into castes and everything is done for the good of the state. There are no families, no individuality, and solitude itself is strongly discouraged.

#### *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

*Fahrenheit 451* is one of Ray Bradbury's best-known books, and a dystopian fiction classic. In a world where books are forbidden and firemen are dispatched to burn them (books ignite at precisely 451 degrees Fahrenheit), one of these men defies the law and keeps a book for himself.

#### *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy

Cormac McCarthy imagines a post-apocalyptic world that's dark, cold, and virtually hopeless. Thieves roam the lawless roads and cannibals lurk in the woods. A man and his son walk the long, dark highway toward the sea in the hope of finding salvation. They experience many dangers and unspeakable barbarity. Only their love for one another keeps them alive. Told in spare, stark language, *The Road* is one of most bleak of the current dystopian novels, imagining an existence so grim that even love itself is in danger of extinction.

*Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel

Shades of the medieval world inform Emily St. John Mandel's elegiac novel about the collapse of global civilization via a flu-like pandemic. Stylistically complex and lushly written, *Station Eleven* imagines a culture kept alive by roving troupes of musicians and actors who perform Shakespeare's plays for a new generation of groundlings. Mandel's literary fiction combines adventure with a haunting tale of love lost, found, and lost yet again.

*The Fire Sermon* by Francesca Haig

Four hundred years after a global nuclear cataclysm, babies are born as sets of twins; one an outwardly flawless Alpha, the other a deformed, Omega. One unusually gifted Omega dreams of overthrowing the twisted government that condemns half the population to servitude and near-starvation. Poetic, lyrical, and adventure-filled, this novel mixes world-building with complex characterization into a thought-provoking look at one possible future.

**Key authors:**

In addition to her classic *The Handmaid's Tale*, **Margaret Atwood** has written a trio of post-human tales, the MaddAddam trilogy, detailing the fall of modern civilization caused by irresponsible genetic engineering. In place of contemporary humans, twisted, distorted creatures emerge, giving rise to a primitive, vestigial civilization. Amusing, inventive, and sad, Atwood's future is as frightening as it is plausible.

**Nancy Kress** takes a trenchant look at how world governments might handle a global crisis like an alien invasion or biological warfare. Her intricately plotted novels, packed with suspense and lyrical description, combine a lightning-fast pace with elegant prose and a cerebral approach to the intersection of science and society. Start with *Yesterday's Kin*, set in a adamantly isolationist, near-future America that is the landing site for aliens wanting to enlist human help in eradicating the deadly spores threatening Earth.

**Mira Grant** combines political commentary and horror in her dystopian novels. In *Feed*, she has a keen eye for the absurd and the ghoulish in her zombie-infested near future. She doesn't just stick with zombies, though. She also speculates on what would happen if corporations produced a bizarre cure for all known diseases (Parasitology trilogy) or what it would be like to live in a world where news coverage is constant and ubiquitous (Newsflesh trilogy).

Hugo and Nebula Award-winner **Paolo Bacigalupi** is a rising star in the dystopian fiction genre. His work details a future without fossil fuel, a plethora of bioengineered plagues, the continued dominance of Western economic power, and the ramifications of climate change. *The Water Knife*, posits severe water shortages, murderously competitive city-states, and the collision of a professional assassin, an underground journalist, and a desperate refugee. He crafts a thrilling, chilling cautionary tale marked by prescient detail and a blistering pace.

Although **Greg Hrbek** is new to the dystopian fiction scene, his first book in the genre, *Not on Fire, But Burning*, is outstanding. Eight years after San Francisco is destroyed by an unexplained nuclear weapon -- blamed on Islamic radicals -- the United States is fragmented and paranoid, interning Muslims in former Indian reservations. Told from multiple viewpoints, it is at once a suspense novel, a cautionary tale, and a thoughtful exploration of grief, hate, and humanity.

## How do I help Dystopian Fiction fans?

Find out what appeals to readers: are they looking for zombies and gore, literate allegory, or maybe political commentary? Perhaps they're looking for a cross-country adventure or a David-versus-Goliath scenario. How about something with unique technology and rousing adventure?

Many movies and television shows are based on excellent dystopian novels and graphic novels such as P.D. James' *Children of Men*, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, and Robert Kirkman's *Walking Dead* graphic novel series. See the movie, then read the book or vice versa!

Dystopian fiction finds quite a few cousins in the nonfiction world. Books about environmental disasters (*The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* by Timothy Egan), the end of humanity (*The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* by Elizabeth Kolbert), or the deterioration of industrial society (Kate Brown's evocative *Dispatches from Dystopia*).

## A few more tips:

- There are quite a few short story collections arranged around dystopian futures. Two of the better ones are *Broken Worlds: Dystopian Stories* which offers a wide variety of scenarios, from nuclear war to totalitarian regimes, and the comprehensive *Wastelands*, edited by John Joseph Adams.
- There are scores of teen dystopian novels that are sure to appeal to adults; many of them are written in series. Remember to click on the series tab.

---

*Michael Nilsson is a freelance writer living in North Carolina.*