Dystopian Fiction

From *Brave New World* to *The Hunger Games*, from 1984 to *The Road*, authors have long been fascinated by dystopias – worlds where everything has gone drastically wrong. Whether it was Mother Nature or human nature that led to the situation, a dystopian setting allows the author to explore how people will act when pushed to extremes, having to survive in and make sense of a dire and unfamiliar world. Similarly, readers of dystopian fiction may ask themselves how they would react to such a world, and whether their choices would be better or worse than those made by the novel’s characters. Sometimes comic, sometimes chilling, usually – though not always – violent, dystopian novels challenge us to look at the proverbial glass not just as half-empty, but drained entirely and shattered on the floor.


Four hostages are rescued from a group of religious extremists in Barcelona. Held hostage together for five years, they make a pact to always watch out for each other. But their world has changed, transformed by ominously rising water. Earth’s major cities are threatened and the former captives are fighting this threat on all fronts. NASA scientist Gary Boyle researches the extreme weather; Helen Gray can’t stop searching for the baby she had in captivity. With London drowning, British military officer Piers Michaelmas is at the forefront of his government’s response and former USAF captain Lily Brooke finds herself in the employ of a financial mogul whose vast wealth matches any government’s resources in reshaping the world’s future. Water continues to flow from the Earth’s mantle, countries disappear, high ground becomes precious and fifty years in the future, there will be no dry land left in the world. Flood is about a small group of people caught up in the struggle to survive unimaginable global disaster. Fans will want to read the sequel, *Ark*.


The year is 2044 and the world is an unpleasant and grim place. Famine and poverty are rampant, and to escape the bleakness of real life most people choose to instead enter the virtual world of *OASIS*. The creator of *OASIS*, James Halliday, has decided to leave his massive fortune, and control of the company, to whoever can solve his huge, 80s geek/pop culture inspired “easter egg” hunt. Our unlikely hero is an overweight trailer park kid who goes by Wade Watts in real life, and “Parzival” to his best friends and mortal enemies--all of whom he interacts with virtually. Ready Player One follows Wade as he tries to solve the puzzles while trying to stay one step ahead of the villains in both the virtual world and the real world.


In the Collective, status is determined by the type and amount of color a person can see. Reds, like Eddie Russet, are the lowest of the Chromatics, just above the Greys, who can’t see color at all. Citizens try to climb up the spectrum or increase their saturation through strategic marriage, and Eddie, who expects to have high red perception, is on a half-promise to Constance Oxblood, daughter of the Collective’s string magnate. His greatest problem in life is how to convince Constance to choose him over his rival Roger Maroon. However, when Eddie accompanies his father on a business trip to the outer fringes, he sees things that he can’t explain, things that challenge everything he believes about his society and the Something-that-Happened, the event that destroyed the Previous centuries before Munsell’s Epiphany. A grey girl named Jane seems to hold the key to some of the mysteries, and she just happens to have the cutest nose that Eddie has ever seen. Too bad for him that she wants nothing to do with a nosy Chromatic whose curiosity could get them both killed and put others in great danger. While still highly satirical, this book is less humorous than Fforde’s previous novels. It also offers little in the way of exposition, which can make it difficult to get into for a while, but once things start to fall into place, readers can feel like they are both on the inside of the colorocracy and privileged to transcend its limitations.


Lenny Abramov lives in an America that could all too possibly take place if things continue as they are: The younger generation is barely literate. The economy is in the dumps and China is our biggest creditor. Security paranoia has turned us into a police state in which citizens are required to “deny and imply” – formally deny the existence of whatever security enforcement is taking place, and at the same time imply their consent to it. Lenny, who still reads paper books and is fast approaching forty, is trying to advance in the life extension company he works for, hoping to be granted their rejuvenation procedure before he’s too long in the tooth. Meanwhile, he has fallen in love with Eunice Kim, a woman much younger than he, who spends most of her time online but who is starting to engage with the real world and its beleaguered denizens. The economy and the political situation begin to rapidly deteriorate, threatening to take Lenny’s new relationship with them.
For readers who appreciate the black humor of Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, and who can tolerate the so-coarse-it’s-funny language and mindset of today’s youth as depicted by Shteyngart.


If there’s such a thing as a gentle dystopian novel, this is it. Set in a time when interstellar travel has become possible between Earth and many other planets, it tells the story of Sutty, a young woman from Earth who has been sent to the planet of Aka as a representative of the Ekumen - a kind of umbrella organization that studies the culture of different worlds and fosters links among them. Through Sutty’s memories, we learn that Earth has suffered from environmental and political disasters, but the focus of the book is on Aka. It has received an enormous and sudden injection of advanced technology through its contact with Earth, and has developed rapidly into a repressive, consumerist police state. When Sutty is sent on a fact-finding trip to a remote, undeveloped area, she learns about the rich prior culture of Aka and the history of how it changed. She also finds herself drawn to the philosophical and spiritual system that existed throughout Aka before its contact with Earth, an oral tradition known as “The Telling.”

Although the context for the book is Aka’s dystopian “Corporation State” (with the background of Earth’s disastrous development), most of the action takes place in the less dystopian area that Sutty visits. Because it’s remote and poor, the region has felt less of the central government’s repression. Sutty spends many months there and immerses herself in the old Akan culture. The climax of the book is a dangerous journey through the mountains to the remote caves where the Akan resistance movement has preserved a library of the old books that the current regime has sought to destroy.

Like many of Ursula Le Guin’s books, The Telling can be read as a parable - a complex, nuanced one - about the conflicts between tradition and change, between consumerism and community, and between technology and spirituality. The characters are interesting and vivid, especially Sutty, and the plot, although it arouses Sutty’s (and maybe the reader’s) sadness and anger, has none of the violence and horror of a more typical dystopian novel. The overall tone is sober but cautiously optimistic about the possibility of learning from past mistakes and changing course for the better. Le Guin’s style, as usual, is lyrical and even poetic, but grounded in the reality of her setting and its problems.


In this compelling read for both teens and adults, Shusterman takes the pro-life/pro-choice debate into a terrifying future. He describes a world after a civil war over abortion where a compromise is reached that outlaws abortion but allows parents or guardians to choose to have their children between the ages of 13 and 17 “unwound.” This involves having every part of their bodies harvested to be donated to another person, so technically they don’t really die. The stories of three teens on their way to a harvest camp intertwine when they find a way to escape. Unwind raises thought-provoking questions about hot-button issues beyond abortion too, like adoption, organ donation, religion, politics and the sanctity of human life. It’s a great book for discussion.