

'Hunger Games' leads morbid trend in teen fiction

Tomorrow, fans of the book 'The Hunger Games' will flood cinemas for the eagerly anticipated release of the film adaptation. It tells a harrowing tale – and it's not alone.



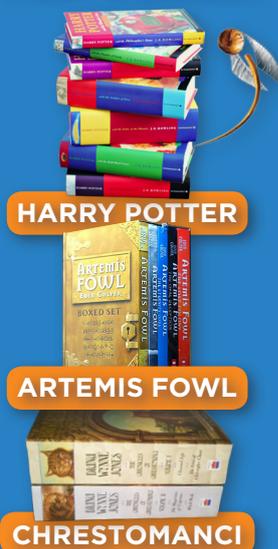
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TEEN FICTION: FROM HOCUS POCUS TO APOCALYPSE

FROM WIZARDS...

...TO VAMPIRES...

...TO DYSTOPIA



Somewhere in a grim post-apocalyptic future, the land that was once North America is dominated by a cruel and decadent elite. Each year, in constant revenge against a long-ago rebellion, sadistic leaders choose teenagers from across the land to slaughter one another.

The Hunger Games is studded by harrowing deaths. Poverty, dictatorship and environmental catastrophe provide the backdrop, while the hero is a teenage girl forced to harden herself into a cold-blooded killer. A century ago most publishers would have been hesitant to publish such a plot even for adults. Yet after a film adaptation hits cinemas tomorrow, Suzanne Collins' books are set to become the next world-beating teen franchise.

The Hunger Games is not an isolated phenomenon: bleak dystopian futures have long been popular territories for teenage literature. In 1974, for instance, *House of Stairs* imagined teenagers being

taken from orphanages and trained to attack one another in a brutal psychological experiment. But recently the theme has become increasingly dominant in the teen market. This year's top sellers are expected to include Moira Young's *Blood Red Road* and *Divergent* by Virginia Roth.

Since 'young adult fiction' gained wide recognition as a category around 30 years ago, it has strayed further and further from cosy territory. More realistic teen novels have always dealt with serious issues. But the fantasy arena, once populated by wholesome young wizards, has recently been ruled by gothic monsters like vampires.

True *Twilight*, the most popular of these, featured some of the soppiest monsters in popular culture. But it is still fairly gruesome in parts – including one particularly notorious episode involving an unborn vampire baby.

The new enthusiasm for dystopia seems

to bring young adult fiction into even darker regions. Why, critics have asked, are teenage tastes becoming so morbid?

YOUNG ADULT FRICTION

Some interpret the bleak themes as echoes of a complex internal world. Our teenage years, they say, are when we first grapple with many big ideas and complex emotions. Isolated heroes, oppressive and hostile authorities, blatant injustice, difficult and intense relationships: the epic, horror-strewn storylines in young adult fiction are a reflection of real-life struggles. They ought, say fans, to be taken seriously and celebrated.

Come off it, say harsher critics. Violence and horror are about cheap thrills, not complex metaphors. *The Hunger Games* might claim to be dealing with psychological and political issues. But in truth, they say, it appeals to a simple thirst for blood and melodrama.

Q & A

Q The film sounds interesting – when can I see it?

A Tomorrow. Unless you are in one of the countries where it has already been released: France, Belgium and a few others. All three books in Collins' trilogy are also available, and currently climbing bestseller lists.

Q Does this mean we're going to get a spree of other post-apocalyptic franchises?

A: It looks likely: the books have already flooded the market, and films are on their way. At least two other films are due to be released this year based on dystopian young adult fiction. The first is *Uglies*, set in a future where young people are given surgery to conform to conventional standards of beauty. The second is *Mortal*

Engines, a gothic science fiction film about predatory multi-storey cities on wheels.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Realistic fiction is boring.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► 'Hunger Games' leads morbid trend in teen fiction

WORD WATCH

Post-apocalyptic – There is a long tradition of post-apocalyptic fiction, set in a world where society as we know it has been shattered by disaster. At the beginning of the 19th Century there was a craze for 'last man' stories, including two by Lord Byron and Mary Shelley. In the 20th Century it became

even more popular, as anxieties grew about the future of humanity: biological war, nuclear war and environmental catastrophe are popular causes of apocalypse.

Dystopian – An imaginary world in which things have gone horribly wrong – the opposite of a utopian, idealistic vision of the perfect society. Dystopia also has a long literary heritage, often as a horribly skewed ver-

sion of utopia. The most famous examples are George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Young adult fiction – Normally this refers to fiction aimed at people roughly between the ages of 11 and 20. Teenagers have always read fiction, of course – but until the middle of the 20th Century, it was not specifically recognised as a whole category of literature. Young adult fiction usually tries to tackle the ideas and emotions that typically concern teenagers.

YOU DECIDE

1. Do you normally prefer books with darker themes?
2. Why do people enjoy reading about horror and violence?

ACTIVITIES

1. Write a short story set in a post-apocalyptic world.
2. Think of a book or film you have seen recently with fan-

tasy or sci-fi elements. What real-world issues do you think it tried to deal with? How successful was it? Write a review addressing these questions.

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 **NOTES**

