

Learning from Disaster: Using Post-Apocalyptic and Dystopian Fiction to Engage and Empower Students

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"In a dark time, the eye begins to see..." —Theodore Roethke

Some Post-Apocalyptic/Dystopian/Cli-Fi books that can be used to discuss and engage environmental and societal issues (ones I've taught or read recently):

Middle Grade (grades 4-7):

The Giver, by Lois Lowry

The City of Ember, Jeanne DuPrau

A Wrinkle in Time, Madeline L'Engle

The Last Panther, Todd Mitchell

Young Adult (grades 8-12):

Feed, M.T. Anderson

The Hunger Games, Suzanne Collins

Shipbreaker, by Paolo Bacigalupi

Little Brother, Cory Doctorow

The House of the Scorpion, Nancy Farmer

Uglies, Scott Westerfeld

Legend, Marie Lu

Divergent, Veronica Roth

The Maze Runner, James Dashner

Shades Children, Garth Nix

Dry or Scythe, Neal Shusterman

Rot and Ruin, Jonathan Maberry

How I Live Now, Meg Rosoff

Glow, Amy Kathleen Ryan

Orleans, Sherri Smith

Life as We Knew It, Susan Pfeffer

Not a Drop to Drink, Mindy McGinnis

Adult:

The Water Knife, Paolo Bacigalupi

Oryx and Crake or *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood

Station Eleven, Emily St. John Mandel

Parable of the Sower, Octavia Butler

Flight Behavior, Barbara Kingsolver

The Road, Cormac McCarthy

Zone One, Colson Whitehead

New York 2140, Kim Standley Robinson

American War, Omar El Akkad

Future Home of the Living God, Louise Erdrich

Classics:

1984 or *Animal Farm*, George Orwell

Brave New World, Aldous Huxley

Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury

It Can't Happen Here, Sinclair Lewis

"Today there may be more reason than ever to find solace in fantasy. With post-9/11 terrorism fears and concern about a warming planet... American authors are turning increasingly to fantasy of a darker kind—the dystopian fiction of *The Hunger Games*, *The Giver*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner*. Like the collapse of the Twin Towers, these are sad and disturbing stories of post-apocalyptic worlds falling apart, of brains implanted with computer chips that reflect anxiety about the intrusion of a consumer society aided by social media. This is a future where hope is qualified, and whose deserted worlds are flat and impoverished. But maybe there's purpose. If children use fairy tales to process their fears, such dystopian fantasies (and their heroes and heroines) may model the hope kids need today to address the scale of the problems ahead."

—Colleen Gillard, from "Why the British Tell Better Children's Stories", *The Atlantic*.

Four Activities for Engaging Dystopian and Apocalyptic Texts

1) **Deep Time Activity:** This pre-reading activity involves a bit of imagination, historical awareness, reflection, sensory imagery, descriptive writing, and making predictions.

Begin by asking students to envision their home town, and to pretend they are in an area they know well there. It helps to give some guided visualization (imagine you're walking down main street. What do you see? Smell? Hear? Are there people around? What are they doing? Etc...). After a few minutes of visualization, ask students to free-write about the area they visualized, describing things they noticed. Then, ask students to step into their time machine and go back 20 years (or 10 years with younger students) and to think about what might have been different about the place. After a minute of visualization, ask them to write some of the changes they noticed. Take three trips back (20, 50, and 100 years) going to the edge of living memory.

Once students have traveled back, try taking three trips forward, imagining the same place 20, 50, and 100 years into the future. Based on our knowledge of how things have changed from the past to the present, we can make predictions on how things might change moving forward. The sharing of details afterward and the discussion of changes people noted is essential. This can also create a good lead-in to how authors work when they write speculative fiction (imagining the future). At the end, consider asking students to write a Past and Future poem (they can start lines in the first stanza with "Once" and lines in the second with "In the future...").

2) **Spaceship Earth:** This is a great group project or essay activity to use with books like *Glow*, *Divergent*, *The City of Ember*, and *The Last Panther*.

The set-up: We have volunteered for a grand experiment. We will be leaving on a spaceship capable of sustaining a small society (the size of a large city) for at least three generations. The primary goal of the experiment is to live on the spaceship sustainably so future generations born on the spaceship can return to earth 150 years later with a flourishing society. As mission planners, you are tasked with making decisions about three main things: **What to bring, what rules to have, and how to organize the spaceship society to create a healthy, sustainable, flourishing society.** For instance, should guns be brought on the ship? If so, how will these be distributed or controlled? Will they use money on the ship? Why or why not? How will resources and privileges be allocated? How will new rules and decisions be made?

A few helpful parameters: The spaceship population will be representative of a diverse American city in terms of race, gender, religion, education, and natural ability. We cannot select the population. Also, we will not be fighting aliens or landing on other planets. The spaceship must be a self-sustaining system. We will determine the rules and laws for the spaceship society. Finally, you do not know what your position on the spaceship will be (philosophers call this the "veil of ignorance").

Once students discuss what to bring, what rules to have, and how things should be organized, they can write an essay or develop a creative project describing their plan. Ultimately, it's eye-opening to discuss any ways in which they chose to organize their spaceship differently from our current society.

3) **Is This Our Future: Connections and Projections Persuasive Debate activity.** This is a great activity to do after reading books like *Feed*, *Ship Breaker*, *The Water Knife*, *Little Brother*, or *The Last Panther*. The activity has two main stages. First, encourage students to make connections between the text and our current society (this can be done both in groups and independently. Often I spend a day or two on this to get students to see beyond surface connections). Then divide the room and ask students to stand on one side if they think we're heading toward the future described in the text in significant ways, and to stand on the other side if they think the future described in the book is very different from what ours will be. They can stand in the middle if they're undecided. Acting as moderator, ask students from each side to make a persuasive case for why their position is correct. Try to get students to respond to other's claims. If students feel persuaded, they can change what side of the room they're standing on.

4) **What If and Ask the Next Question:** This creative activity is a great way to get students to take a practitioner's approach and learn by doing. Ask students to think of a problem that bugs them (cell phone addiction, cyber-bullying, species extinction, etc...) then to imagine a future where that problem is worse in an exaggerated way. For instance, what if people had cell phones implanted in their heads? Then get students to **ask the next question**—how would that change things? How might people relate, talk, and act differently as a result? Encourage students to keep exploring how one small change can affect many things. The final step is to have students write a scene showing an everyday event in that world which would be different because of their What If.

Final note: I used to think the challenge was to get people to see the problems we face.

Now I think the challenge is to get people to see the solutions.

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