

# Spotlight on Dystopian

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Dystopian stories are set in worlds that are bleak and nightmarish, often because there has been some sort of catastrophe. They are intended to make us feel scared and uncomfortable as we read them.

## How it began

Before the dystopian genre, there was the utopian genre. This started with Thomas Moore's book *Utopia*, published in 1516. Utopian stories feature worlds where humans have created an ideal society.

The idea of a dystopia began to appear in the nineteenth century as writers criticised utopian stories and challenged the utopian idea that humans can become perfect.

Dystopian stories became more common during the twentieth century as the First and Second World Wars made people lose hope in the ideal society. Their popularity grew after the horrors of the Second World War and the fears during the Cold War.

Sometimes reality catches up with dystopian stories that once seemed far-fetched, and suddenly they seem plausible. An example of this is the parallels that people are seeing between the invented languages in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the way that Donald Trump uses language.

## Common themes

Poverty and squalor

Oppression, constant surveillance, lack of justice and harsh punishments

Rebellion and revolution

Wars and propaganda

Disaster or environmental ruin

A society that accepts people behaving in terrible ways

Technology advancing beyond human ability to control it

A protagonist who sets out to change things

Dystopian stories are often used as a warning against current world trends (eg. During the Cold War when a nuclear war seemed likely lots of dystopian stories were set in post-apocalyptic worlds where a nuclear war had destroyed society)

The story is often unresolved at the end and the dystopia continues

### **Famous dystopian authors**

Aldous Huxley

George Orwell

Phillip K Dick

Cormac McCarthy

H.G. Wells (who wrote both utopian and dystopian)

Ray Bradbury

Shirley Jackson (her most famous dystopian is a short story called 'The Lottery' – look it up online and read it)

Suzanne Collins

James Dashner

Lois Lowry

Margaret Peterson Haddix

Scott Westerfeld

Veronica Roth

Allie Condie

### **It links to other genres...**

Dystopian stories are a type of speculative fiction.

Dystopian is closely linked with sci-fi, and many stories are both dystopian and sci-fi.