

A GOLDEN AGE FOR DYSTOPIAN FICTION

What to make of our new literature of radical pessimism.

By Jill Lepore May 29, 2017

Here are the plots of some new dystopian novels, set in the near future. The world got too hot, so a wealthy celebrity persuaded a small number of very rich people to move to a makeshift satellite that, from orbit, leaches the last nourishment the earth has to give, leaving everyone else to starve. The people on the satellite have lost their genitals, through some kind of instant mutation or super-quick evolution, but there is a lot of sex anyway, since it's become fashionable to have surgical procedures to give yourself a variety of appendages and openings, along with decorative skin grafts and tattoos, there being so little else to do. There are no children, but the celebrity who rules the satellite has been trying to create them by torturing women from the earth's surface. ("We are what happens when the seemingly unthinkable celebrity rises to power," the novel's narrator says.) Or: North Korea deployed a brain-damaging chemical weapon that made everyone in the United States, or at least everyone in L.A., an idiot, except for a few people who were on a boat the day the scourge came, but the idiots, who are otherwise remarkably sweet, round up and kill those people, out of fear. Led by a man known only as the Chief, the idiots build a wall around downtown to keep out the Drifters and the stupidest people, the Shamblers, who don't know how to tie shoes or button buttons; they wander around, naked and barefoot. Thanks, in part, to the difficulty of clothing, there is a lot of sex, random and unsatisfying, but there are very few children, because no one knows how to take care of them. (The jacket copy bills this novel as "the first book of the Trump era.")

Or: Machines replaced humans, doing all the work and providing all the food, and, even though if you leave the city it is hotter everywhere else, some huffy young people do, because they are so bored, not to mention that they are mad at their parents, who do annoying things like run giant corporations. The runaways are called walkaways. (I gather they're not in a terribly big hurry.) They talk about revolution, take a lot of baths, upload their brains onto computers, and have a lot of sex, but, to be honest, they are

very boring. Or: Even after the coasts were lost to the floods when the ice caps melted, the American South, defying a new federal law, refused to give up fossil fuels, and seceded, which led to a civil war, which had been going on for decades, and was about to be over, on Reunification Day, except that a woman from Louisiana who lost her whole family in the war went to the celebration and released a poison that killed a hundred million people, which doesn't seem like the tragedy it might have been, because in this future world, as in all the others, there's not much to live for, what with the petty tyrants, the rotten weather, and the crappy sex. It will not give too much away if I say that none of these novels have a happy ending (though one has a twist). Then again, none of them have a happy beginning, either.

Dystopias follow utopias the way thunder follows lightning. This year, the thunder is roaring. But people are so grumpy, what with the petty tyrants and such, that it's easy to forget how recently lightning struck. "Whether we measure our progress in terms of wiredness, open-mindedness, or optimism, the country is moving in the right direction, and faster, perhaps, than even we would have believed," a reporter for *Wired* wrote in May, 2000. "We are, as a nation, better educated, more tolerant, and more connected because of—not in spite of—the convergence of the internet and public life. Partisanship, religion, geography, race, gender, and other traditional political divisions are giving way to a new standard—wiredness—as an organizing principle." Nor was the utopianism merely technological, or callow. In January, 2008, Barack Obama gave a speech in New Hampshire, about the American creed:

It was a creed written into the
founding documents that declared
the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can.
It was whispered by slaves and
abolitionists as they blazed a trail
towards freedom through the
darkest of nights: Yes, we can. It
was sung by immigrants as they
struck out from distant shores and
pioneers who pushed westward
against an unforgiving wilderness:
Yes, we can. . . . Yes, we can heal

this nation. Yes, we can repair this
world. Yes, we can.

That was the lightning, the flash of hope, the promise of perfectibility. The argument of dystopianism is that perfection comes at the cost of freedom. Every new lament about the end of the republic, every column about the collapse of civilization, every new novel of doom: these are its answering thunder. Rumble, thud, rumble, ka-boom, KA-BOOM!

A utopia is a paradise, a dystopia a paradise lost. Before utopias and dystopias became imagined futures, they were imagined pasts, or imagined places, like the Garden of Eden. “I have found a continent more densely peopled and abounding in animals than our Europe or Asia or Africa, and, in addition, a climate milder and more delightful than in any other region known to us,” Amerigo Vespucci wrote, in extravagant letters describing his voyages across the Atlantic, published in 1503 as “Mundus Novus,” a new world. In 1516, Thomas More published a fictional account of a sailor on one of Vespucci’s ships who had travelled just a bit farther, to the island of Utopia, where he found a perfect republic. (More coined the term: “utopia” means “nowhere.”) “Gulliver’s Travels” (1726) is a satire of the utopianism of the Enlightenment. On the island of Laputa, Gulliver visits the Academy of Lagado, where the sages, the first progressives, are busy trying to make pincushions out of marble, breeding naked sheep, and improving the language by getting rid of all the words. The word “dystopia,” meaning “an unhappy country,” was coined in the seventeen-forties, as the historian Gregory Claeys points out in a shrewd new study, “Dystopia: A Natural History” (Oxford). In its modern definition, a dystopia can be apocalyptic, or post-apocalyptic, or neither, but it has to be anti-utopian, a utopia turned upside down, a world in which people tried to build a republic of perfection only to find that they had created a republic of misery. “A Trip to the Island of Equality,” a 1792 reply to Thomas Paine’s “Rights of Man,” is a dystopia (on the island, the pursuit of equality has reduced everyone to living in caves), but Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel, “The Last Man,” in which the last human being dies in the year 2100 of a dreadful plague, is not dystopian; it’s merely apocalyptic.

The dystopian novel emerged in response to the first utopian novels, like Edward Bellamy’s best-selling 1888 fantasy, “Looking Backward,” about a socialist utopia in the year 2000. “Looking Backward” was so successful that it produced a dozen anti-socialist, anti-utopian replies, including “Looking Further Backward” (in which China

invades the United States, which has been weakened by its embrace of socialism) and “Looking Further Forward” (in which socialism is so unquestionable that a history professor who refutes it is demoted to the rank of janitor). In 1887, a year before Bellamy, the American writer Anna Bowman Dodd published “The Republic of the Future,” a socialist dystopia set in New York in 2050, in which women and men are equal, children are reared by the state, machines handle all the work, and most people, having nothing else to do, spend much of their time at the gym, obsessed with fitness. Dodd describes this world as “the very acme of dreariness.” What is a dystopia? The gym. (That’s still true. In a 2011 episode of “Black Mirror,” life on earth in an energy-scarce future has been reduced to an interminable spin class.)

MORE FROM THIS ISSUE

JUNE 5 & 12, 2017

LIFE AND LETTERS

I Have Fallen in Love
with American Names

By Philip Roth

ON TELEVISION

The Apocalypse
According to “The
Leftovers”

By Emily Nussbaum

THE PICTURES

Danny McBride’s
Horror Show

By Tad Friend

FICTION

“Crossi
Name”

By Will M

Utopians believe in progress; dystopians don’t. They fight this argument out in competing visions of the future, utopians offering promises, dystopians issuing warnings. In 1895, in “The Time Machine,” H. G. Wells introduced the remarkably handy device of travelling through time by way of a clock. After that, time travel proved convenient, but even Wells didn’t always use a machine. In his 1899 novel, “When the Sleeper Awakes,” his hero simply oversleeps his way to the twenty-first century, where he finds a world in which people are enslaved by propaganda, and “helpless in the hands of the demagogue.” That’s one problem with dystopian fiction: forewarned is not always forearmed.

Sleeping through the warning signs is another problem. “I was asleep before,” the heroine of “The Handmaid’s Tale” says in the new Hulu production of Margaret

Atwood's 1986 novel. "That's how we let it happen." But what about when everyone's awake, and there are plenty of warnings, but no one does anything about them? "NK3," by Michael Tolkin (Atlantic), is an intricate and cleverly constructed account of the aftermath of a North Korean chemical attack; the NK3 of the title has entirely destroyed its victims' memories and has vastly diminished their capacity to reason. This puts the novel's characters in the same position as the readers of all dystopian fiction: they're left to try to piece together not a whodunnit but a howdidthappen. Seth Kaplan, who'd been a pediatric oncologist, pages through periodicals left in a seat back on a Singapore Airlines jet, on the ground at LAX. The periodicals, like the plane, hadn't moved since the plague arrived. "It confused Seth that the plague was front-page news in some but not all of the papers," Tolkin writes. "They still printed reviews of movies and books, articles about new cars, ways to make inexpensive costumes for Halloween." Everyone had been awake, but they'd been busy shopping for cars and picking out movies and cutting eyeholes in paper bags.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Crossword Puzzles with a Side of Millennial Socialism

This spring's blighted crop of dystopian novels is pessimistic about technology, about the economy, about politics, and about the planet, making it a more abundant harvest of unhappiness than most other heydays of downheartedness. The Internet did not stitch us all together. Economic growth has led to widening economic inequality and a looming environmental crisis. Democracy appears to be yielding to authoritarianism. "Hopes, dashed" is, lately, a long list, and getting longer. The plane is grounded, seat backs in the upright position, and we are dying, slowly, of stupidity.

Pick your present-day dilemma; there's a new dystopian novel to match it. Worried about political polarization? In "American War" (Knopf), Omar El Akkad traces the United States' descent from gridlock to barbarism as the states of the former Confederacy (or, at least, the parts that aren't underwater) refuse to abide by the Sustainable Future Act, and secede in 2074. Troubled by the new Jim Crow? Ben H. Winters's "Underground Airlines" (Little, Brown) is set in an early-twenty-first-century United States in which slavery abides, made crueller, and more inescapable, by the giant, unregulated slave-owning corporations that deploy the surveillance powers of modern technology, so that even escaping to the North (on underground airlines) hardly offers much hope, since free blacks in cities like Chicago live in segregated neighborhoods with no decent housing or schooling or work and it's the very poverty in which they live that defeats arguments for abolition by hardening ideas about race. As the book's narrator, a fugitive slave, explains, "Black gets to mean poor and poor to mean dangerous and all the words get murked together and become one dark idea, a cloud of smoke, the smokestack fumes drifting like filthy air across the rest of the nation."

Radical pessimism is a dismal trend. The despair, this particular publishing season, comes in many forms, including the grotesque. In "The Book of Joan" (Harper), Lidia Yuknavitch's narrator, Christine Pizan, is forty-nine, and about to die, because she's living on a satellite orbiting the earth, where everyone is executed at the age of fifty; the wet in their bodies constitutes the colony's water supply. (Dystopia, here, is menopause.) Her body has aged: "If hormones have any meaning left for any of us, it is latent at best." She examines herself in the mirror: "I have a slight rise where each breast began, and a kind of mound where my pubic bone should be, but that's it. Nothing else of woman is left." Yuknavitch's Pizan is a resurrection of the medieval French scholar and historian Christine de Pisan, who in 1405 wrote the allegorical

“Book of the City of Ladies,” and, in 1429, “The Song of Joan of Arc,” an account of the life of the martyr. In the year 2049, Yuknavitch’s Pizan writes on her body, by a torturous process of self-mutilation, the story of a twenty-first-century Joan, who is trying to save the planet from Jean de Men (another historical allusion), the insane celebrity who has become its ruler. In the end, de Men himself is revealed to be “not a man but what is left of a woman,” with “all the traces: sad, stitched-up sacks of flesh where breasts had once been, as if someone tried too hard to erase their existence. And a bulbous sagging gash sutured over and over where . . . life had perhaps happened in the past, or not, and worse, several dangling attempts at half-formed penises, sewn and abandoned, distended and limp.”

Equal rights for women, emancipation, Reconstruction, civil rights: so many hopes, dashed; so many causes, lost. Pisan pictured a city of women; Lincoln believed in union; King had a dream. Yuknavitch and El Akkad and Winters unspool the reels of those dreams, and recut them as nightmares. This move isn’t new, or daring; it is, instead, very old. The question is whether it’s all used up, as parched as a post-apocalyptic desert, as barren as an old woman, as addled as an old man.

A utopia is a planned society; planned societies are often disastrous; that’s why utopias contain their own dystopias. Most early-twentieth-century dystopian novels took the form of political parables, critiques of planned societies, from both the left and the right. The utopianism of Communists, eugenicists, New Dealers, and Fascists produced the Russian novelist Yevgeny Zamyatin’s “We” in 1924, Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” in 1935, Ayn Rand’s “Anthem” in 1937, and George Orwell’s “1984” in 1949. After the war, after the death camps, after the bomb, dystopian fiction thrived, like a weed that favors shade. “A decreasing percentage of the imaginary worlds are utopias,” the literary scholar Chad Walsh observed in 1962. “An increasing percentage are nightmares.”

Much postwar pessimism had to do with the superficiality of mass culture in an age of affluence, and with the fear that the banality and conformity of consumer society had reduced people to robots. “I drive my car to supermarket,” John Updike wrote in 1954. “The way I take is superhigh, / A superlot is where I park it, / And Super Suds are what I buy.” Supersudsy television boosterism is the utopianism attacked by Kurt Vonnegut in “Player Piano” (1952) and by Ray Bradbury in “Fahrenheit 451” (1953).

Cold War dystopianism came in as many flavors as soda pop or superheroes and in as many sizes as nuclear warheads. But, in a deeper sense, the mid-century overtaking of utopianism by dystopianism marked the rise of modern conservatism: a rejection of the idea of the liberal state. Rand's "Atlas Shrugged" appeared in 1957, and climbed up the *Times* best-seller list. It has sold more than eight million copies.

The second half of the twentieth century, of course, also produced liberal-minded dystopias, chiefly concerned with issuing warnings about pollution and climate change, nuclear weapons and corporate monopolies, technological totalitarianism and the fragility of rights secured from the state. There were, for instance, feminist dystopias. The utopianism of the Moral Majority, founded in 1979, lies behind "The Handmaid's Tale" (a book that is, among other things, an updating of Harriet Jacobs's 1861 "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl"). But rights-based dystopianism also led to the creation of a subgenre of dystopian fiction: bleak futures for bobby-soxers.

Dystopianism turns out to have a natural affinity with American adolescence. And this, I think, is where the life of the genre got squeezed out, like a beetle burned up on an asphalt driveway by a boy wielding a magnifying glass on a sunny day. It sizzles, and then it smokes, and then it just lies there, dead as a bug.

Dystopias featuring teen-age characters have been a staple of high-school life since "The Lord of the Flies" came out, in 1954. But the genre only really took off in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, when distrust of adult institutions and adult authority flourished, and the publishing industry began producing fiction packaged for "young adults," ages twelve to eighteen. Some of these books are pretty good. M. T. Anderson's 2002 Y.A. novel, "Feed," is a smart and fierce answer to the "Don't Be Evil" utopianism of Google, founded in 1996. All of them are characterized by a withering contempt for adults and by an unshakable suspicion of authority. "The Hunger Games" trilogy, whose first installment appeared in 2008, has to do with economic inequality, but, like all Y.A. dystopian fiction, it's also addressed to readers who feel betrayed by a world that looked so much better to them when they were just a bit younger. "I grew up a little, and I gradually began to figure out that pretty much *everyone* had been lying to me about pretty much *everything*," the high-school-age narrator writes at the beginning of Ernest Cline's best-selling 2011 Y.A. novel, "Ready Player One."

Lately, even dystopian fiction marketed to adults has an adolescent sensibility, pouty and hostile. Cory Doctorow's new novel, "Walkaway" (Tor), begins late at night at a party in a derelict factory with a main character named Hubert: "At twenty-seven, he had seven years on the next oldest partier." The story goes on in this way, with Doctorow inviting grownup readers to hang out with adolescents, looking for immortality, while supplying neologisms like "spum" instead of "spam" to remind us that we're in a world that's close to our own, but weird. "My father spies on me," the novel's young heroine complains. "Walkaway" comes with an endorsement from Edward Snowden. Doctorow's earlier novel, a Y.A. book called "Little Brother," told the story of four teen-agers and their fight for Internet privacy rights. With "Walkaway," Doctorow pounds the same nails with the same bludgeon. His walkaways are trying to turn a dystopia into a utopia by writing better computer code than their enemies. "A pod of mercs and an infotech goon pwnd everything using some zeroday they'd bought from scumbag default infowar researchers" is the sort of thing they say. "They took over the drone fleet, and while we dewormed it, seized the mechas."

Every dystopia is a history of the future. What are the consequences of a literature, even a pulp literature, of political desperation? "It's a sad commentary on our age that we find dystopias a lot easier to believe in than utopias," Atwood wrote in the nineteen-eighties. "Utopias we can only imagine; dystopias we've already had." But what was really happening then was that the genre and its readers were sorting themselves out by political preference, following the same path—to the same ideological bunkers—as families, friends, neighborhoods, and the news. In the first year of Obama's Presidency, Americans bought half a million copies of "Atlas Shrugged." In the first month of the Administration of Donald ("American carnage") Trump, during which Kellyanne Conway talked about alternative facts, "1984" jumped to the top of the Amazon best-seller list. (Steve Bannon is a particular fan of a 1973 French novel called "The Camp of the Saints," in which Europe is overrun by dark-skinned immigrants.) The duel of dystopias is nothing so much as yet another place poisoned by polarized politics, a proxy war of imaginary worlds.

Dystopia used to be a fiction of resistance; it's become a fiction of submission, the fiction of an untrusting, lonely, and sullen twenty-first century, the fiction of fake news and infowars, the fiction of helplessness and hopelessness. It cannot imagine a better future, and it doesn't ask anyone to bother to make one. It nurses grievances and

indulges resentments; it doesn't call for courage; it finds that cowardice suffices. Its only admonition is: Despair more. It appeals to both the left and the right, because, in the end, it requires so little by way of literary, political, or moral imagination, asking only that you enjoy the company of people whose fear of the future aligns comfortably with your own. Left or right, the radical pessimism of an unremitting dystopianism has itself contributed to the unravelling of the liberal state and the weakening of a commitment to political pluralism. "This isn't a story about war," El Akkad writes in "American War." "It's about ruin." A story about ruin can be beautiful. Wreckage is romantic. But a politics of ruin is doomed. ♦

This article appears in the print edition of the June 5 & 12, 2017, issue, with the headline "No, We Cannot."

Jill Lepore is a staff writer at The New Yorker and a professor of history at Harvard University. Her latest book is "These Truths: A History of the United States." [Read more »](#)

CONDÉ NAST

© 2019 Condé Nast. All rights reserved. Use of and/or registration on any portion of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement \(updated 5/25/18\)](#) and [Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement \(updated 5/25/18\)](#). [Your California Privacy Rights](#). The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Condé Nast. *The New Yorker* may earn a portion of sales from products and services that are purchased through links on our site as part of our affiliate partnerships with retailers. [Ad Choices](#)