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## Teens hunger for dystopian tales

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It's hard not to notice. Young adult fiction today is dominated by fantastical dystopias and post-apocalyptic plotlines. Often, supernatural forces and other-worldly creatures, such as vampires, zombies and ghouls, make themselves known, too.

The young adult fiction category has proven to be so expansive, so popular, that it's no longer limited to young adults or books. Plenty of grown-ups are reading novels such as Suzanne Collins' "The Hunger Games" and Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" series, and plenty of novels (including those two) have been turned into big-budget movies.

Hollywood likes the genre because it's plot-driven and full of action, violence, magic and interesting characters who must contend with catastrophe, or at least the possibility of it. And the books typically come in trilogies or series that help moviemakers minimize risk and maximize profit.

It's nothing short of a phenomenon, one the Charleston County Public Library is embracing and that the annual YALLFest event, organized by Jonathan Sanchez of Blue Bicycle Books and authors Margaret Stohl and Melissa de la Cruz, is celebrating.

The library's One Book Charleston County initiative, now in its third year, has taken a turn toward teen dystopia in an effort to get younger readers involved, according to Deputy Director Cynthia Bledsoe.

The book selected this time is "Divergent" by [Veronica Roth](#). It's the first in a trilogy (of course), and it's being made into a movie (of course). The second novel in the trilogy, "Insurgent," was released in May 2012; the final book, "Allegiant," will be out next month.

"Divergent" is a dystopian coming-of-age story set in Chicago. Its plot (and logo) shares certain features with "The Hunger Games."

Bledsoe said the choice reflects a deliberate effort to connect One Book with YALLFest.

"We were so impressed the last couple of years with YALLFest," she said. "We hadn't captured students as a part of (the One Book initiative) and we would like to do that. So we thought, hey, this is a logical partnership. So we looked at authors coming to YALLFest, and read through some of the books. We thought 'Divergent' really fit the bill."

It's popular with both teens and adults, and boys and girls, she said. It's part of a series, which means it's more likely that "people will keep reading." And it's soon to become a big Hollywood movie.

"Every year we try to look at a book we think will appeal to the community; every year we try to approach it slightly differently," Bledsoe said.

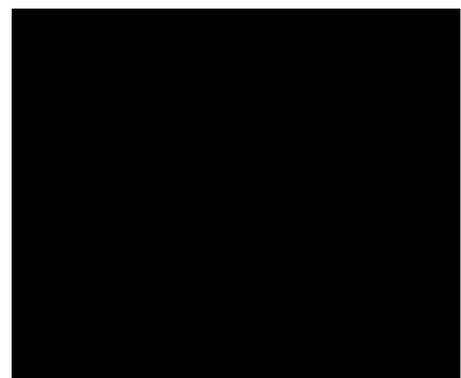
The library distributes free copies of the book, available now at most branches, and "Divergent"

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A slew of related events are scheduled for Oct. 1–Nov. 9; the last two overlap with YALLFest, a literary extravaganza featuring dozens of young adult authors. Programming includes a trivia contest, scavenger hunt, erudite lectures on literary utopias and dystopias, self-defense class for young women, musical performances by Faith Lyn and more.

Andria Amaral, manager of the library's young adult department and a YALLFest board member, said lots of adults have shown interest in "Divergent," perhaps drawn to the book because they knew their kids already had read it.

"I'm hearing more and more from adults who say, 'I never would have picked up the book on my own, but I stayed up all night reading it,'" Amaral said. "What I love about this book is teenagers can read it as an exciting adventure story, and an adult can latch on to the more complex and universal themes in the book. ... That creates wonderful opportunities for conversations."

In 2011, One Book launched with Julie Dash's "Daughters of the Dust." Last year, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" by Jonathan Safran Foer was the book of choice. But the library has seen its circulation of young adult fiction rise dramatically in recent years, Bledsoe said. So it made sense to broaden the program's appeal. Who doesn't like a good page-turner? Who can't relate to a good rebel or the trials of a reluctant hero? Who is not anxious about the state of the world?

#### Cautionary tales

Claire Curtis, a political science professor at the College of Charleston who studies utopian and dystopian literature, said these young adult novels tell "starting-over stories; that's why we like them."

And the dystopian formula, which typically is a construction of the social contract theory, always conveys a warning of some kind that resonates easily with readers. The social contract, a product of the 18th-century Enlightenment, holds that individual freedoms are willingly compromised in exchange for the security provided by authority. Certain rights are forfeited in order to protect other rights. But at what point is the line crossed? When does benevolent authority become authoritarian?

The dauntless individual makes for good drama, but radical individualism is no way to live productively, Curtis said. "How do we build a community recognizing vulnerability and interdependence?"

Dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction has been popular for a century, she said, but it's gotten especially popular in recent years as the young adult genre has embraced these stories and movies have distributed them far and wide.

Almost all of them — from the adult books such as Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" and Margaret Atwood's "Oryx and Crake" to teen fictions like "The Giver" by Lois Lowry and Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" — are written to reflect or comment on actual events or circumstances, Curtis said. In the middle of the 20th century, such novels were produced in response to political totalitarianism. Some expressed anxieties over the possibility of nuclear annihilation. And today, increasingly, dystopian stories (in print, in film and on TV) are set in a decimated landscape reflecting concerns over climate change and environmental degradation.

In this sense, they are cautionary tales with a moral imperative at its center, Curtis said.

"But even in dystopias there is still hope," she added. And readers are provoked to think: "I don't live in that world; I have to keep that world from becoming real."

The best of these books inspire critical thinking about the condition of humanity on the planet, Curtis said. The worst of them present protagonists who are morally lazy and are written by authors who fail to question that laziness.

"They are supposed to awaken the moral imagination and (get readers to) think about a world that's radically different," Curtis said.

Lifting all boats

Stohl, who co-authored “Beautiful Creatures” with her writing partner, Kami Garcia, and helped get YALLFest started three years ago, said the starting point of the young adult lit phenom can roughly be identified as the moment Stephanie Meyer’s gothic fantasy-romance “Twilight” first hit bookshelves.

True, “Harry Potter” had already captured the imagination of the world’s children, but that J.K. Rowling series was initially targeted at middle-grade kids, Stohl said. (Those younger children then grew up with Harry to become the teen consumers of “Twilight” and “Beautiful Creatures.”)

After “Twilight,” another shift: the rise of dystopian or fantastical stories featuring female protagonists.

“Kami Garcia and I wrote ‘Beautiful Creatures’ in response to “Twilight,” Stohl said. “We wanted the girl to be the strong character, not only the one who falls in love.”

The fantasy genre used to be a small niche, its titles occupying a few shelves nearby literary novels such as “Lord of the Flies,” “The Outsiders” and all those Judy Blume books. But then fantasy blossomed at about the same time the young adult category started to expand, resulting in a kind of convergence, Stohl said.

Quickly, young adult books went global, changing the genre, she said. “When we’re writing, we’re not writing for (only) an American audience anymore.” Issues such as free will or authoritarianism take on a different meaning among readers from, say, the Middle East or China. “It changes how we think about our reader.”

Has the genre become too successful, too commercial? If so, Stohl is not concerned.

“Everything adjusts itself naturally,” she said. “Readers become savvy and sophisticated naturally. It’s hardest to write for teens, they are the most critical of all. They can smell a fraud a mile away.”

Besides, the more young adult books, the more authors are able “to push forward and innovate,” she said.

“It’s fun to be a young-adult writer. Our fans are really responsive. They come out and see us, which we love,” she continued. “There is nothing we can’t experiment with or try. It’s really freeing. It’s also nice because the authors like each other. We like to be together, we like to help each other. We truly believe that rising tide lifts all boats. I think that’s why we relate to our readers so well as writers. We were the kinds of teens who were always looking for our tribe. We found that tribe in other writers and readers.”

So introduce a young reader to “Divergent” or some other dystopian fantasy in which teenagers struggle to survive — to understand themselves, to come of age, to assert their identity and independence — and that reader likely will recognize a faint reflection of herself, Stohl said.

“Being a teen can be lonely. It’s a thing we all share.”

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