

Name: _____ Due Wednesday,

Directions: Read and annotate this essay. When you are done, answer the following questions:

According to the author, what are three reasons why we like dystopian literature?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Why do you like dystopian literature? If you dislike it, why do you dislike it?

Why Do We Like Dystopian Novels?

By Dave Astor

War. Death. Despair. Oppression. Environmental ruin. Yup, when it comes to demoralizing literature, dystopian novels have it all! Yet many of us love this genre, and there are good reasons we do.

For one thing, we're reading about rather than actually living through the bad stuff happening in the near or far future. We're not "in the arena" like the beleaguered tributes of *The Hunger Games*, the dystopian trilogy I recently finished. And, while dystopian novels are depressing, there's a certain "rightness" in reading about a future that's negative. Why? Because we know that politicians, military people and corporate moguls are capable of doing awful things -- meaning dystopian novels feel kind of honest.

The Hunger Games certainly felt honest. That terrific trilogy gives its memorable characters some uplifting moments, but there are a greater number of downbeat outcomes --

especially in the third installment, *Mockingjay*. So, even though *The Hunger Games* (first book) and *Catching Fire* (second book) are more engaging (albeit often horrific), the final book truly rings true. Dictatorship, revolution and counterrevolution usually cause severe physical and psychological damage to the victims and other participants. To her credit, author Suzanne Collins doesn't sanitize that for us.

Other excellent dystopian novels are also filled with carnage, inhumanity, hopelessness and more. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*. H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and *The Shape of Things to Come*. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*. Jack London's *The Iron Heel*. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*. Etc.

Sometimes, authors of dystopian literature temporarily ease the tension a bit with humor, as the great Atwood does with some of the clever genetic-engineering terms she coined for *Oryx and Crake*. And dystopian books can have seemingly utopian elements -- with things not appearing too bad even though they *are* bad; *Brave New World* is a perfect example. There are even novels, such as *The Shape of Things to Come*, that mix dystopian and actual utopian elements.

We admire the best dystopian novels because they're written well and depict people we can relate to. We're fascinated by the terrible things these characters face, and by how some react bravely and some react cowardly or with resignation. We, as readers, rubberneck to see the misery; we can't avert our eyes even as we're enraged by what despots and other vicious officials are doing to citizens. And we're compelled to turn the pages as we wonder if rebels and other members of the populace can somehow remake a wretched society into something more positive. We also wonder who will survive and who won't; I was surprised by some of the characters who end up dying in *The Hunger Games* (a trilogy I read on the enthusiastic recommendation of commenter "threnodymarch").

Last but not least, we admire dystopian novels because, by giving us worst-case scenarios of the future, maybe our current society can be jolted enough to avoid those scenarios eventually happening in real life. Like some of the characters in dystopian novels, we might feel a little against-all-odds hope. Then again, maybe not...