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Life of chaos, life of hope: Dystopian literature for young adults

Lisa Newgard
University of Northern Iowa

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Life of chaos, life of hope: Dystopian literature for young adults

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Abstract

As dystopian literature grows in popularity, teacher librarians many not fully understand the themes found within this new subgenre. The purpose of this research was to describe the themes in positively reviewed dystopian literature for young adults. Themes found during the research included: resilience of the protagonist, survival, government control, social conformity, and love between the protagonist and another young adult. Novels from 2001-2010 were analyzed for themes and lessons for young adults. Thirteen positively reviewed novels were chosen, read, and coded by the researcher. After the first reading of the novels, one novel was eliminated, leaving 12 novels to be reported. The five themes were established through the analysis; five lessons presented to the readers will be described in the conclusions.

LIFE OF CHAOS, LIFE OF HOPE:
DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE FOR YOUNG ADULTS

A Graduate Research Paper
Submitted to the
Division of School Library Studies
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By
Lisa Newgard
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has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts.

Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Reader

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Graduate Faculty Reader

Date Approved

Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

ABSTRACT

As dystopian literature grows in popularity, teacher librarians many not fully understand the themes found within this new subgenre. The purpose of this research was to describe the themes in positively reviewed dystopian literature for young adults. Themes found during the research included: resilience of the protagonist, survival, government control, social conformity, and love between the protagonist and another young adult. Novels from 2001-2010 were analyzed for themes and lessons for young adults. Thirteen positively reviewed novels were chosen, read, and coded by the researcher. After the first reading of the novels, one novel was eliminated, leaving 12 novels to be reported. The five themes were established through the analysis; five lessons presented to the readers will be described in the conclusions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	vii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Justification	1
Significances	3
Problem Statement	3
Purpose	3
Research Questions	3
Assumptions and Limitations	3
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	4
Themes in Young Adult Literature	4
Female Roles in Dystopian Novels	5
The Role of Communities and Families in Dystopian Novels	7
Young Adult Roles in Dystopian Novels	10
Summary	13
Deficiencies	14
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY	15
Research Design	15
Book Sample	15
Data Collection Procedures	16
Data Analysis	19
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS	20
Themes Present in Young Adult Dystopian Literature	20

Resilience of the Protagonist	21
Survival	22
Government Control	24
Societal Conformity	25
Love between the Protagonist and another Young Adult	26
Summary	28
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION	29
Conclusions	29
Recommendations for Further Study	34
REFERENCES	36
APPENDIX A: INITIAL LIST OF BOOKS	38
APPENDIX B: NOTE TAKING FORM.....	40

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
1 Preliminary Themes	17
2 Presence of Themes	18
3 Themes Remaining After Analysis	19
4 Final Themes	20
5 Lessons From the Novels	30

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Literary dystopia . . . are imagined societies in which the deepest demands of human nature are either subverted, perverted, or simply made unattainable” (Barash, 2004, p. B10).

Justification

John Stuart Mills first used the term dystopia in 1868 and the Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary now defines it as, “an imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives” (Dystopia, 2010). Although this subgenre has been around since the mid 1900’s with novels such as *1984* by George Orwell and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, it is rapidly growing popular among young adult readers (Springen, 2010). Teenagers are discovering societies much different from the ones they encounter on a daily basis.

Dystopian literature written for children has been on the rise since the end of the Cold War (Bradford, Mallan, Stephens, & McCallum R., 2003). As the world experienced the Cold War, authors started thinking about a catastrophic event and what life would be like following it. The authors hope to draw in readers as they focus their novels on an environmental crisis and subsequent ecological collapse. These disaster scenario books were popular well into the 1990’s and continue to be popular today.

In a post 9/11 world, some authors attribute the prevalence and continued publication of dystopian literature to the current turmoil of society (Cart, 2010). Many dystopian books are written by taking speculative situations and exaggerating them to become more interesting to readers. Although the portrayal of the society may not be

fully developed or completely realistic, it causes the reader to question different nuances of their own society.

Some research on fictional dystopian societies has been done on single books or authors, such as Hintz's (2006) study of one book by Lois Lowry and two books by Monica Hughes. However, the study does not cover the subgenre itself for what it brings to current young adult literature. Hintz found dystopian literature providing a source for young adults to get a glimpse into society and politics while realizing the importance of independence.

Similarly, Bullen and Parsons (2007) examined two newer young adult novels for the role children played within the societies. They, like Hintz, found that dystopian literature shows children to be resilient and independent, using their individualism as strength against a conforming society. Again, this study only focused on two books, making it difficult to generalize to the entire subgenre.

Kennon (2005) researched the role of young adult females play in dystopian literature. Kennon concluded, "dystopian fiction can provide valuable opportunities for young readers to reflect on the complex process of their engagement with the regulatory power relations of their communities" (p. 48). Focusing on female protagonists may not give a teacher librarian a fully developed view of dystopian literature and how it may pertain to all students. Although, this research discussed a variety of dystopian novels published at the time, there has been a large influx of this subgenre within the last few years.

Significance

As dystopian literature continues to grow in popularity, teacher librarians and young adults should be aware of the themes found within this type of literature. Knowing the themes uncovered in this literature will help teacher librarians suggest new titles for teens and engage young readers on discourses about these texts.

Problem Statement

The problem this research will address is teacher librarians may not fully understand the themes to be found in young adult dystopian literature.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to describe the themes in positively reviewed dystopian literature for young adults.

Research Questions

1. What themes are present in young adult dystopian literature?
2. What lessons are presented to young adults through this type of literature?
3. What do these themes or lessons aim to teach the reader about present day society?

Assumptions

Dystopian literature is growing in popularity among teens.

Limitations

This research is limited to award-winning quality young adult literature published between 2000 and 2010.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to describe the themes in positively reviewed dystopian literature for young adults. Research related to this topic falls into four categories: themes in young adult literature, female roles in dystopian novels, the role of communities and families in dystopian novels, and young adult roles in dystopian novels.

Themes in Young Adult Literature

Many studies have been done to determine what young adults are looking for in novels and how the literature affects the reader's enjoyment. Koss and Teale (2009) analyzed young adult literature to find trends, topics, and writing styles. Koss and Teale were looking for the popular genres, the groups represented, and the content of current young adult literature. The researchers narrowed the 370 award-winning books, popular books, and favorite young adult books in fiction and non-fiction by randomly selecting 59 titles. These titles were read, coded, and analyzed.

Koss and Teale (2009) found 85% of the novels were fiction, and almost 50% of the fiction titles fell into the *contemporary realistic fiction* category. The second most popular genre found was *fantasy* but only 12% of the fiction novels evaluated. Overall, the fiction books were not representative of the cultural diversity of the readers, where most of the protagonists were European American. However, international settings were more prevalent than culturally diverse protagonists.

One overarching theme in many of the fiction novels was teens finding themselves and dealing with teenage struggles (Koss & Teale, 2009). The literature tends to focus on the complications teens go through in their normal lives. This is a change from literature

that used to focus on a large life-changing event. Most of the literature analyzed was written as a first person narration, which is consistent with previous research on young adult literature. Koss and Teale found the current trends to be appropriate for today's young adults.

Female Roles in Dystopian Novels

Dystopian literature is a genre that has not been thoroughly studied. Mohr (2005) studied three novels for their portrayal of females in dystopian societies. Her qualitative study of three novels discussed the themes and the qualities that make them dystopian novels. Mohr examined the "novels' generic hybridity, narrative structure, transgressive aspects of form, postmodern narrative elements, and transgressive narration" (pp. 5-6). Focusing on the analysis of different types of dystopia and utopia within the novels also brought Mohr's attention to the portrayal of gender, class, and race. Examining the novels it was evident that there isn't a clear-cut divide between utopia and dystopia as pieces are woven together within one story.

In *Holdfast* by Suzy McKee Charna's, Mohr (2005) found there was substantial physical violence and graphic pictures. It showed a better life after the conflict and ended positively. In Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, the process into a better society was not shown from an omniscient view of a large community, but instead through the eyes of an individual. This created less physical violence but more psychological and verbal violence. This book also ended positively. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* also showed a more personal transformation, however entailed violence similar to *Holdfast*. Unique in this novel is the direct individual resistance and sharing of the protagonists' thoughts with the reader.

All of the novels shared elements of science fiction and elements of fantasy. The author recommended the creation of a new subgenre utopian dystopia to describe the fiction she analyzed. One major affirmation for Mohr (2005) after reading the selected texts was the presence of female heroines and how they created a resistance in non-traditional ways. It was also noted by Mohr, that reading texts similar to these cause people to rethink their lives and structures. “It is a reality and a future that includes us all in a frame of difference and equality” (p. 280).

Examining novels is a common way for researchers to analyze a type of literature. Kennon (2005) similarly examines four young adult dystopian novels with female protagonists. These novels were analyzed for the sense of community that is formed when an adult or parent is no longer present, as well as the leadership role females play within the story.

Displacement is a theme Kennon (2005) found throughout all of the books. Young adults were forced out of their comfortable lives where they were protected by parents and adults to a world where they were on their own for a variety of reasons. Two of the novels showed young adults creating new and creative uses for adult dominated real estate. Having female protagonists increased the conveyed importance of family, Kennon noted. All four of the novels also showed female protagonists challenging the status quo in their newly acquired roles as leading a new world. Attempting to balance their own identities, the identity of the community and identifying the new identity of the nation prove to provide tremendous challenges to the protagonists.

Kennon (2005) concluded young adult readers choosing dystopian fiction are challenged “to reflect on the complex process of their engagement with the regulatory

power relations of their communities” (p. 48). However, these novels do provide females a chance to see themselves in a role of power and identify with a strong female protagonist. These new roles are still rooted in the family and societal values instilled from current societies but challenge the reader to see beyond.

The Role of Communities and Families in Dystopian Novels

Creating communities or family-like structures is a theme found in dystopian literature. Aitken, Bradford, and Massey (2005) explored this theme in two novels, *The Scavenger's Tale* and *Off the Road*, both set in British societies established after major disasters in the twenty-first century. Both stories have male protagonists who belong in the *outcast* society. The authors of the study analyzed the texts for the role of politics and government in their societies. Specifically looking at how this affected the protagonists and what consequences were suffered due to the political power structure.

In both novels the protagonists are forced from the only home structures they have known due to rules and regulations of the government (Aitken et al., 2005). Both are forced to find a family in unusual situations. Throughout this journey both Bradford and Tom (the male protagonists) learn that the society they have always lived in is not perfect. Specifically, Bradford discovers that all children should be given basic rights of education, food, and justice. Tom becomes aware of two societies living around him, each believing they are governing correctly, though doing so in completely different manners. While on this journey of discovery, each male learns to critique his own society and look for hope in a world of inequity.

As each protagonist finds his place within his newly found part of society, each fills his need for family with people close to him in his new situation (Aitken et al., 2005).

Neither novel brings the stories to a close, leaving the reader questioning what happened in their newly found communities and how their new place in society is impacted by the politics. Aitken et al. concluded that the role of government played a strong role in both stories. Bedford finishes his journey without really knowing what is in store for his future but hoping he has helped the world become better. Tom closes his story with a return to his society where he is sitting in a situation where he may have some power in the near future. Both endings show different consequences suffered from similar societies.

Finding community is an important part of any society, Mallan, Bradford, and Stephens (2005) explore the role of family and community in literature written for children and young adults. The authors studied seven fictional stories published between 1997 and 2004 by Australian, American, Canadian, and British authors. Examining the change in politics in Western society from 1990 forward, the authors were seeking connections between the real world and the fictional world. In particular, they focused on the individual, cultural societies, refugees, and the role of a central government.

Finding a strong family unit in each novel where the characters had a strong allegiance and bond with one another was an additional focus of the study (Mallan et al., 2005). While looking at three of the novels, the researchers found that at times a tight knit family can weaken the ties of community. This is done when some of the cornerstones of a family, reliance and reciprocity, are not extended into the needs of the community. Without trust outside of the family unit, a community has a hard time coming together as one and can ultimately lead to the fall of a community.

In other novels it was found that, “without a functioning family life, the society is incapable of any acts of altruism or compassion” (Mallen et al., 2005, p. 12). This is only

one part of the society but the stark contrast between the two make it evident that family structures are important to the success of any society. The obvious divide between the two parts of society causes a creation of borders, both literal and presumed. Both novels had political overtones where the government played off of the divide within the society, emphasizing to the reader the importance of pluralism.

The final three novels focused on the role of refugees with regards to the creation of a family unit (Mallen et al., 2005). As the protagonists leave their communities in search for a better future, they each learn the importance of a family unit. “The formation of a elective families within intensely dystopian settings is associated with the possibility of a better future (p. 18). As the protagonists search for another person or group of people who can be depended on, they feel as though they are closer to finding a community in which to belong. The theme found throughout all of the different novels was that during difficult times we need a family structure to support and guide us.

Family does not always mean people related by blood or marriage, but a group of people who form a bond of support and trust. Harris (2002) studies this fact in a total of 11 novels written for teens. Harris examines the literature as a contrast to wilderness survival novels, looking to find a theme of *the city vs. the wilderness* referenced throughout. Starting with the post catastrophe city, moving to the inner city, and finishing with novels set in the underground city, Harris examines the novels for the successful establishment of communities.

In novels set in the post catastrophe city, Harris (2005) found children are left alone to make decisions and set up a way to live. Children constructing *families* with other children in similar situations were evident throughout all of the novels. During the

inner city books, children had to learn to be good and to find a place of refuge, away from the chaos found their current living situation. Finally, in the underground city novels, children seek to create a *better city* and move to the *wilderness* in search of a place they can establish together.

Altogether, the novels showed teens proving themselves to be more resilient than the adults in their lives and take on roles much beyond their years (Harris, 2002). As the children establish places with their own rules, regulations, and administration the young adults in the novels prove that they can move into the *adult* world if there is a need to survive. Each of the novels showed a shift in the protagonists' viewpoint and the desire to make their world better by surrounding themselves with high quality people and creating a more inclusive community.

Young Adult Roles in Dystopian Novels

Finding a place in society is something children seek as they enter into their teenage years. Hintz (2002) studies three novels for how they address “political action within the developmental narrative of adolescence” (p. 254). Lois Lowry wrote one of the novels examined while the other two were written by Monica Hughes, both known for their work in dystopian literature written for young adults. Hintz questions how the *developmental narrative* affects the utopian view of the novel.

Each protagonist takes political action based on his or her experiences and questions of the society (Hintz, 2002). The questioning of society comes from a state of confusion we find the protagonist to be a part of. As the answers to the questions become clear the protagonist is forced to make difficult choices. Young adults are used in this role as they share an unclouded perspective compared to the adults in their same society.

These steps of questioning, confusion, and ultimate choices parallel personal matters adolescents experience (Hintz, 2002). This parallelism allows the author to delve into deep political issues while keeping the interest of the reader. Within the novels “freedom, for example, is figured simultaneously as a political issue and a negotiation between adolescents and their family or friends” (p. 263). Each of the protagonists seeks freedom for themselves and all members of their society, wanting a perfect society beyond what they are currently experiencing. They want to seek their own solutions and are willing to reject the status quo and take a risk to better the society as a whole. These novels give young adults the feeling that they can make political change happen, just as the protagonists do.

Change does not come easily, but children in dystopian novels have a way of creating change. Bullen and Parsons (2007) also analyzed young adult novels for the role of the child and how this affected social change and hope for the future. They focus on two novels set in societies where there is a lot of uncertainty. Specifically using Ulrich Beck’s risk society thesis to look for ways in which the novel’s author makes social critiques. Among all of this Bullen and Parsons question, “in the absence of a happy ending for western civilization, what kind of children can survive in dystopia?” (p. 127).

Both novels, *Feed* by M.T. Anderson and *Mortal Engines* by Philip Reeve, share the hopes and fears of the protagonists as they ventures through part of their adolescence. Bullens and Parsons (2007) make the connection to Ulrich Beck’s stage where scarcity is no longer the most important problem of the society, but instead capitalist expansion is. As businesses expand different environmental and human consequences are found. In both novels, the protagonists live in societies that look out for the perceived good of the

whole. In *Mortal Engines*, the city constantly feeds its citizen's propaganda of the city's beauty, when in reality it is big and ugly. *Feed*, on the other hand, sends constant Internet streams through a brain implant to all people and sends a constant feed of advertisement to keep producers happy. Both governments attempt to cut down on individualism by taking globalization to the extreme. Children grow up in a perceived perfect world.

Ulrich Beck's second key to risk societies is global politics (Bullens & Parsons, 2007). Each novel covers this in a different way. Larger cities taking over smaller cities to be in control of the most resources is the way global politics is shown in *Mortal Engines*. *Feed* shows the possible effects of continued American driven consumerism, where beliefs and qualities of America are shared among all. Neither society is taking into consideration what the environmental or human costs involved are.

The final quality of Ulrich Beck's risk societies is excess of consumption (Bullens & Parsons, 2007). As mentioned above, *Feed* focuses on the commercialism and encouraging all members of society to purchase based on the advertising streamed to them. On the converse, in *Mortal Engines* the consumption does not become evident until the protagonist is dislodged from his city into the *wilderness* and he learns that consumption is a choice.

Ultimately, all of Ulrich Beck's parts of risk society are evident within the novels studied (Bullens & Parsons, 2007). In response to their question on happy endings, it was determined that no children can survive in the absence of a happy ending. Overall, both authors challenge the readers to see part of themselves within the protagonist and make judgments of their own lives. The authors encourage the readers to make changes to

change the potential society from becoming a reality.

Summary

Females play a strong role in dystopian novels. Mohr (2005) found females challenging the traditional roles and creating resistance efforts against the society. Similarly, Kennon (2005) established females within dystopian literature convey the importance of family. It also allows female readers to see a sense of themselves within the characters, encouraging them to make changes.

There are often strong females within different communities and families. Thus, these groups are an important part of dystopian novels as they form the basis for the protagonist's experiences. Governments and societies play a large role in dystopian literature through their control and regulations over the citizens (Aitken et al., 2005). Forming communities with those suffering in similar ways is a strategy to make changes and to survive. Families form a basis for the communities and without this basic structure, the community as a whole falls apart (Mallan et al., 2005). No matter the setting of the novel, teens forming groups and communities with others show resilience and cooperation beyond what most adults can do (Harris, 2002).

Young adults play a pivotal role in dystopian novels as they usually serve as the protagonist as well as draw in the adolescent reader. Using struggles in a teenager's life is a way to parallel literary conflicts within a societal setting that adolescents can understand (Hintz, 2006). Reading novels where teens can empathize with the protagonist or see themselves making similar judgments is one of the goals of dystopian literature (Bullens & Parsons, 2007). Teens want to relate to the protagonist and the authors hope to encourage change in today's current society by sharing the *what if's* with

the reader.

Deficiencies

Little research has been done on current dystopian literature written for young adults. Some studies (Bullen & Parsons, 2007; Kennon, 2005; Hintz, 2002; Harris, 2002) have looked at dystopian novels written for young adults, but lack current novels in this growing genre. Most novels studies (Kennon, 2005; Hintz, 2002; Harris, 2002) have not examined fiction most young adults today are reading. A few studies looked at a small number of authors (Bullen & Parsons, 2007; Hintz, 2002) but more research needs to be done on current novels and new authors since these publications.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to describe the themes in positively reviewed dystopian literature for young adults. Earlier research showed a need for analyzing current young adult dystopian fiction. The researcher analyzed novels from 2001-2010 for themes and lessons for young adults.

Research Design

A qualitative study, “analyzes the information for description and themes” (Creswell, 2008, p. 645). A qualitative content analysis focuses on researcher-selected texts by examining the themes and drawing conclusions (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Specifically, the researcher used *directed content analysis* focusing on the themes other researchers found in dystopian literature. Using the themes as a starting reference when analyzing the texts allowed the researcher to expand upon the prior research conclusions of dystopian literature. Zhang and Wildumuth describe the technique for expanding research, “through careful data preparation, coding, and interpretation, the results of qualitative content analysis can support the development of new theories and models as well as validating existing theories and providing thick descriptions of particular settings or phenomena” (p. 317).

Book Sample

The researcher began with a search of *dystop** in *Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database* and H. W. Wilson’s *Middle & Junior High Core Collection*. The searches were limited to fiction books published after 2001. This year was chosen as the beginning date due to the rise in dystopian literature seen in the United States after

9/11 (Cart, 2010). As a result of the searches within these databases 60 novels fit the criteria. The books resulting from the search within the *Children's Literature Comprehensive Database* were cross-referenced with the *Middle & Junior High Core Collection* to assure they were all positively reviewed and appropriate for 13-18 year old readers. The cross-reference only reduced the list to 57 novels. To further narrow the list of novels each was searched in the WorldCat catalog to determine the number of libraries owning the novels. Due to the popularity of these novels with OCLC member libraries, 1800 libraries needed to have the book in their catalog to be included in this study. The books were sorted from the greatest to least. Books that were a part of a series were narrowed to the first of the series. From the original list of 60 novels the top 13 (see Appendix A) were chosen for review. This is a combination of books in series and stand-alone novels. All novels chosen fit the age, popularity, and positive review qualifications.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher read each selected novel twice and documented each of the readings in a journal. Appendix B shows the note taking form used. During the first reading, the researcher noted the age and gender of the protagonist and looked for preliminary themes. These 12 themes were taken from previous research on dystopian novels. Additional themes that emerged from the reading were added to the preliminary list for the remaining novels being read. The preliminary themes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Preliminary 12 Themes

Strong female protagonist
Governmental or political conflict
Focus on survival
Strong family or community structures
Resilience of the protagonist
Cooperation between young adults
Conflicts in the teenagers life parallels literary conflicts
Governmental control
Strong young adult presence where the reader can empathize with characters
<i>City vs. Wilderness</i>
Caste system
Need for survival

During the second reading of each novel the researcher finalized the themes for each book and looked for connections among the novels. Using the preliminary themes and the additional themes found during the second reading, the researcher identified lessons being learned by the protagonist. The researcher also documented quotes to support the themes and lessons. Additionally, the researcher sought meaning about what the author was trying to teach the reader about present day society and noted this during the second reading. After reading each novel twice, one was removed as a misnomer. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* would be better labeled as historical fiction and does not fit into the dystopian novel sub-genre.

At the conclusion of reading all 12 novels the themes were ranked in order of importance. An additional five themes were found when reading the novels and were included in the theme analysis in Table 2. The researcher determined that there needed to be at least seven books with the theme to apply the generalization to the entire sub-genre.

The researcher tallied the themes from each of the 12 novels in Table 2.

Table 2

Expanded List of 17 Themes

Theme	Number of novels theme occurred
Strong young adult presence where the reader can empathize with characters	12
Growing up	12
Uncertainty	12
Resilience of the protagonist	11
Focus on survival	9
Cooperation between young adults	9
Need for survival	9
Societal conformity	9
Love between the protagonist and another young adult	9
City vs. Wilderness	8
Strong family or community structures	7
Governmental control	7
Strong female protagonist	6
Conflicts in the teenagers life parallels literary conflicts	5
Covers important current issues	5
Caste system	4
Governmental or political conflict	2

The researcher decided that themes must be present in more than seven novels to be included in further analysis. Thus five themes were removed from the analysis. Upon further review of the themes, focus on survival and need for survival were found in all the same novels, therefore they were collapsed into one category – need for survival.

Reexamining the themes further, City vs. Wilderness was very similar to the need for survival so these were collapsed, and the theme was renamed survival to encompass all of the survival related novels. Thus ten themes remained in the analysis.

Another five themes were removed because they were found to be the basis of general young adult novels, and were not specific only to dystopian novels. Strong family

or community structure, cooperation between young adults, strong young adult presence where the reader can empathize with characters, growing up, and uncertainty are found in most novels written for young adults and do not stand out in the dystopian subgenre. The removal of these themes was based on a definition of “young adult literature” in *The Oxford encyclopedia of children's literature* (Zipes, 2006). Table 3 shows the 10 themes removed to allow for a better representation of the subgenre. After the removal of the 10 themes, 5 themes remained for further analysis.

Table 3

Themes Remaining After Analysis

Resilience of the protagonist
Survival
Governmental control
Societal conformity
Love between the protagonist and another young adult

Data Analysis

Zhang & Wildemuth (2009) discussed the process of qualitative content analysis as starting with analyzing the data as the texts are being read. Coding the information includes looking for similarities and differences within the text. The researcher created categories from the coded information. Creswell (2008) stated coding allows the researcher to use the data more effectively and find patterns. Some of the coding categories came from previous research studies, while others came from the texts being analyzed. Novels may have multiple codes and categories, but the researcher confirmed all the categories were coded consistently. Conclusions emerged from the categorized information and findings reported.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The researcher read 12 positively reviewed young adult dystopian novels to analyze common themes and to study lessons taught from the novel and examine themes and lessons presented to the reader. Tables were created to see the similarities among the 12 novels. Table 4 shows which novels were coded to which themes.

Themes Present in Young Adult Dystopian Literature

Table 4

Final Themes

Theme	Novels where theme is present
Resilience of the protagonist	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Life As We Knew It</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>Incarceron</i> <i>The Roar</i> <i>Candor</i> <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>Tunnels</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i> <i>Unwind</i>
Survival	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Life As We Knew It</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>Incarceron</i> <i>The Roar</i> <i>Feed</i> <i>Candor</i> <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> <i>Tunnels</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i> <i>Unwind</i>

Governmental control	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>Incarceron</i> <i>The Roar</i> <i>Candor</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i>
Societal conformity	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>Incarceron</i> <i>Feed</i> <i>Candor</i> <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>Tunnels</i> <i>Unwind</i>
Love between the protagonist and another young adult	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>Incarceron</i> <i>Feed</i> <i>Candor</i> <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i> <i>Unwind</i>

Resilience of the Protagonist

Every novel, except for *Feed* exhibited a resilience of the protagonist. As the central character was faced with different types of adversity, he or she was able to stay strong and tackle through all challenges. This was most evident in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, each time Todd thought he was safe or things were going his way he would face another obstacle on his journey. Todd and Viola struggle to stay ahead of the army looking to kill them. Throughout the novel Todd loses a good friend, a dog, and a father. After his father leaves Todd to sacrifice himself, Todd gets very depressed.

It's pointless and stupid and there's only suffering and pain and people who want

to hurt you. You can't love nothing or no one cuz it'll all be taken away or ruined and you'll be left alone and constantly having to fight, constantly having to run just to stay alive. (p. 267)

Despite always losing those closest to him, Todd perseveres to save himself and Viola from the army and the people they meet. Todd showed resilience but also used Viola to help him survive.

In *The Roar*, Mika showed resilience through the constant belief that his sister Ellie was alive. His parents and teachers were convinced she died in an accident but a body was never uncovered. The feeling Mika has and the vivid dreams about his sister prove to him that she is alive. In the quest to find her, Mika battles his way through many tasks. He spends most of his extra time playing government sponsored video games he feels will help him find his sister. These video games are so real they Mika feels like they are a simulator. When he sits in the pilot seat, he feels as though he has experienced this before, but it must be his connection with his sister.

The moment her foot touched the ground in the hangar, something cursed through the fabric of Cape Wrath and into Mika's body through the bed. He awoke, knowing she had arrived with as much certainty as if she'd walked into the room and tapped him on the shoulder. (p. 336)

This strong connection forces Mika to be resilient through the frightening *games*. It's this strength that reunites him with Ellie, the strength that keeps him fighting to survive.

Survival

The need for survival was prevalent in nine of the novels. The reader sees a first hand view of survival in *Life As We Knew It*. A meteorological disaster changes the orbit

of the moon. This causes global climate changes and creates natural disasters across the entire world. Miranda and her family have the foresight to purchase and ration food and water from the very beginning. The novel follows Miranda for a year as she and her family experience an early frost, an extreme winter, and an agonizing illness where they almost lose one of their own. One night when the other three members of her family are fighting a terrible illness, Miranda writes in her journal,

By tonight I could be completely alone. I told myself over and over again that I shouldn't let that happen. We were strong. We ate, we had heat, and shelter.

We'd been lucky so far. We'd stay lucky. We'd stay alive. (p. 298)

Through all of these events Miranda and her family struggle to survive. They struggle to ration food, they struggle to find clean water, and they struggle to keep themselves occupied. The extreme weather conditions threaten them everyday, but they manage to fight through, they manage to survive.

The struggle for survival varied in each novel. Many of them were very obvious like *The Hunger Games*, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, and *Unwind*, where the main character is literally fighting for survival on a daily basis. In *Candor* however, Oscar listens to tapes he specially made to keep out the town's brainwashing messages. "Just because I hear them doesn't mean I have to obey. That's what makes me different from the others" (p. 8). Although he is not in danger of his life, he is in danger of losing who he is. In *Candor*, he's the one who helps other teens run away from the brainwashing, but to accomplish that Oscar has to create messages to keep himself strong, to keep the truth alive. Throughout the novel, Oscar constantly struggles to survive and stay above the messages.

Government Control

Just like the *government* in Candor controlled the people in the town, six other novels shared the theme of governmental control. In each of those novels the protagonist did not think the government was fair and did his or her best to fight against it, whether it's literally fighting, like Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, or *fighting* to help people escape, similar to Oscar in *Candor*. In *The Hunger Games* there are many signs of rebellion, starting with District 12 not clapping when the tributes are announced knowing that one sister, Katniss, has sacrificed herself for another, Prim. Throughout the novel there are other signs too. Katniss and Peeta hold hands during the opening ceremonies, Katniss covers Rue with flowers when she dies, and the defiance continues up until the last of the games where she and Peeta start to eat poison berries. As Peeta and Katniss watch the recap of the games Katniss thinks, "I do notice they omit the part where I covered her [Rue] in flowers. Right. Because even that smacks of rebellion" (p. 255). All of these acts were in direct defiance against the strict government and against the Capital's Hunger Games.

The Other Side of the Island showed governmental control to another extreme. The community of Island 365 not only dictates what you should believe in, Earth Mother, but also controls the weather. On Island 365 the weather is usually the same and the sky is different colors depending on the time of the day. The government has control of the weather because they created a ceiling over the island. In school, children learn the *Sayings of Earth Mother* and must practice her teachings. Books are edited to match the weather reality found on the island. Children born in the same year are given a list of first names containing the same first letter to choose from. Honor, the protagonist, stands out

because her 'H' isn't prominent. When being accepted to Old Colony school Miss Blessing said, "We think she will do very well with us,' ... 'and in time, she'll change her name. We've seen it in the past'" (p. 8). Honor's parents challenge the system by having a second child, Qunitilian, and not fully believing the Earth Mother. It's because of this defiance that Pamela and Will, Honor's parents, disappear. After that, Honor tries to take care of her brother, but is forced to live on school grounds with the other orphans. While living at the school, Honor uncovers secrets and learns her parents are brainwashed and working as servants. Honor runs away from the school and ventures into the unknown to free her parents and try to stop the brainwashing. The novel was full of examples, which show the control the government has in all aspects of the inhabitants of Island 395's lives. In each of the seven novels read there was a protagonist who did his or her part to take a stand against what was happening in the community or world.

Social Conformity

Many societies have rules and laws that are followed. However, nine of the novels studied had communities with social conformities, which would never be allowed by today's standards. *Unwind* follows three teens that have been marked to be 'unwound' "the process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive" (p. 1). In *The Bill of Life* *unwinding* is stated as only acceptable to do to children between the ages of 13 and 18. Not only are children between these ages allowed to be unwound, newborn children are allowed to be 'storked.' This process involves the new mother dropping a child off on a random doorstep and the person who discovers the baby becomes the legal guardian. This practice of *recycling* and *rejecting* for the greater good is something that would not be allowed today, but in the novel, it is well accepted and sometimes lucrative.

Incarceron shows a distinctly different type of social conformity. Although the setting seems to be in the future because of technology present throughout the novel, which does not exist today, the characters all live as though it is the 18th century. There are no cars; everyone travels by horse and carriage. The dress and mannerisms are all consistent with what we know of the 18th century. In the novel, there is not supposed to be anything modern. However, when Claudia dirties her dress she says to her maid,

‘Put it through the washing machine. I know you’ve got it somewhere.’

Alys gave her a glare. They both knew endless archaic scrubbing and beating and starching of clothes was so wearing that the staff had secretly abandoned Protocol long ago. (p. 105)

Although there is technology to do some of these tasks, the entire area conforms to the desires of the Warden to keep it in Era. Even when learning her mother died during childbirth Claudia thinks, “Illness was rife, but for the rich, illegal drugs could be found. Medicines too modern for this Era.... Could he [her father] have sacrificed his wife just because of Protocol?” (p.106). Living in a world based on technology and practices from the 18th century proves at times to be difficult, but the Warden has enough power to command it. These two novels showcase some of the ways societal conformity plays a role in dystopian literature.

Love between the Protagonist and another Young Adult

Love is a common theme in dystopian novels. Ten of the novels contained a love interest by the protagonist. In *Uglies*, Tally leaves everything she knows in Uglyville to find Shay in an unknown village called Smoke. Tally does not know that she will be brought back to Uglyville by love. While in Smoke when she was supposed to be

bringing Shay back to town, and turning in all of the escapees living in Smoke, she meets and falls in love with David. He sees her true beauty, and that's what attracts Tally to him. "Maybe he could see past her ugly face. Maybe what was inside her did matter to him more than anything else" (p. 184). Tally's realization of this solidifies her feelings for David and she realizes it is love that she feels. As the novel continues Tally finds herself within the toils of love and risking everything to be with him.

Risking everything is what Titus feels he must do to save Violet in *Feed*. Violet and Titus meet on the moon and from that moment on, Titus likes her. They visit a club and Titus thinks,

Violet grabbed on to my arm, and now I was thinking that even though she looked really uncomfortable, and like she was watching some kind of bugs in an experiment, it wasn't so bad being a bug as long as she grabbed on to my arm.
(p. 28)

It was at this club that both of their feeds received a virus. Unlike many teenagers, Violet did not have a feed until she was seven. This causes her feed to be unstable and, because of the virus, it malfunctions. Her feed malfunction is so severe it slowly kills Violet. After finding out the news that Violet was dying, Titus reacts, "I held on to her, and she held on to me. We held like that. We were staring at the wall" (p. 140). This challenge of not knowing what to do or say shows the feelings Titus is trying to process but isn't sure what to do about them. Toward the end of her life Violet says,

I'm not messaging you to say I'm sorry, because I'm not, not for everything.
But I am messaging you to say that I love you, and that you're completely wrong about me thinking you're stupid. I always thought you could teach me things. I

was always waiting. You're not like the others. (p. 217)

This novel shows a portrayal of love and loss through teenagers. It shows the ups and downs of teenage relationships. Love is an area many young adults can relate to and it's a common theme in the dystopian novels reviewed.

Summary

Young adult dystopian novels shared many themes. The most prevalent theme was resilience of the protagonist found in 11 of the 12 novels. The remaining four themes were important to the development of the novel as dystopian literature. These five guiding themes create the dystopian subgenre growing in popularity among young adults.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

As dystopian literature grows in popularity, teacher librarians many not fully understand the themes found within this new subgenre. The purpose of this research was to describe the themes in positively reviewed dystopian literature for young adults. Themes found during the research included: resilience of the protagonist, survival, government control, social conformity, and love between the protagonist and another young adult. Novels from 2001-2010 were analyzed for themes and lessons for young adults. Thirteen positively reviewed novels were chosen, read, and coded by the researcher. After the first reading of the novels, one novel was eliminated, leaving 12 novels to be reported. The five themes were established through the analysis; five lessons presented to the readers will be described in the conclusions.

Conclusions

Resilience of the protagonist and survival were two themes found in 11 of the 12 reviewed novels (see Table 4). Some of the other themes found in the research were surprising to the researcher. Government control was only present in 7 of the 12 novels. This was surprising because the researcher felt it would be a guiding principle in this type of writing. As dystopian literature shows life as it could be, it was not surprising that social conformity was a major theme in most of the novels evaluated. Love between the protagonist and another young adult was another theme, which was anticipated. The researcher thought it might be a general theme in young adult literature, but learned during research that this is not so according to a professional definition of young adult literature (Zipes, 2006). Finding love in many of the dystopian novels made it an

overarching theme in this type of literature.

In addition to these themes previously discussed, dystopian literature provides lessons to be learned; five overarching messages came out of the 12 novels. These encompassed many different characters and different situations but were present in most novels. The lessons are presented in Table 5. Each of the messages was the work of the author to leave the reader with something to think about after completing the novel.

Table 5

Lessons from the Novels

Lesson	Novels where theme is present
Individuality	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Life As We Knew It</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>Incarceron</i> <i>The Roar</i> <i>Feed</i> <i>Candor</i> <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>Tunnels</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i> <i>Unwind</i>
Keeping hope	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Life As We Knew It</i> <i>Incarceron</i> <i>The Roar</i> <i>Feed</i> <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>Tunnels</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i> <i>Unwind</i>

Technology gone too far	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>The Roar</i> <i>Feed</i> <i>Candor</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i> <i>Unwind</i>
Protect our environment	<i>Life As We Knew It</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>The Roar</i> <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i>
Altruism	<i>The Hunger Games</i> <i>Life As We Knew It</i> <i>Uglies</i> <i>The Roar</i> <i>Candor</i> <i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> <i>The Other Side of the Island</i> <i>Tunnels</i> <i>The Supernaturalist</i> <i>Unwind</i>

Individuality was shown in all of the novels. Each protagonist was true to himself or herself as the novel progressed. In each situation the main character stood up for what he or she believed in and persevered toward a goal to make the world better. The society in *Uglies* takes this to the extreme where they wish each person to look similar so there is no prejudice. In this community, young adults at age sixteen undergo a surgery to make them pretty and to conform their looks. The novel uncovers reasons why this is unsafe and young adults lose their identity. At one point in the novel Tally says to David, “You really think I’m beautiful.” [David replies] “Yes. What you do, the way you think, makes you beautiful,” (p. 183). Throughout the novel David tries to tell Tally she’s beautiful for

her imperfections and they are not something that need to be *fixed*. Callused fingers, scratched faces, and dirty clothes are a sign of hard work, not something that needs to be adjusted. The author challenges the reader during this novel to realize that individuality is important. At the end of the day it only matters what you do and say. This lesson comes up often in dystopian literature.

In 10 of the novels the protagonist is challenged to keep hope. This was most evident in *The Hunger Games*, as Katniss fights for her life. There were many times she doubted she could complete the games and was sure she would not last. However, Katniss proved herself wrong and throughout the games she kept hope. As more and more of her competitors perished she allowed herself to think about what returning home could mean, allowed herself to think about what being a victor would be like. Similarly, Miranda in *Life as we Knew it*, kept hope during the bleak winter that her family would all survive. She had hope that the food would last them and when her family got sick, she had hope that they would get better. Within the lesson of keeping hope the goal from the author is for readers to learn that there is always a chance for things to get better. Things cannot always get worse; eventually something will go your way.

In the world of technology there are advances and changes each day. Many of the novels contained a discussion of technology and many of them show technology gone too far. In *The Supernaturalist*, technology rules many aspects of people's lives. There is a satellite that commands all of the roadways and intersections. When it malfunctions there are accidents and disasters. People no longer know how to drive because the satellite does it for them. The satellite also controls all of the cameras, emergency responses, and electronics. The technology is all around the people of Satellite City in many ways. The

inhabitants don't even realize the presence most days.

In *Feed*, technology is literally embedded in people's minds. They receive a constant feed giving them advertising based on their location or their thoughts. Messages can be sent between people through the feed and movies, music, and television can be enjoyed through the feed. The feed constantly monitors spending habits and will alert the person of sales on particular items. In *Feed*, we see technology integrate all aspects of the young adults lives. Technology is a great tool and is being used more and more each day. However the authors challenge young adults to think about the uses of technology and make their own decisions on what is right and wrong. What seems right and just now, may not always seem that way in a few years when things have gone too far.

Another overarching lesson was to protect our environment. Many of the novels showed exaggerated situations of our current use of natural resources. In *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, Todd's community was formed after leaving Earth to establish another community on another planet, New World. This was the same reason Violet and her family came, to establish a new colony because according to Hilda, a woman Todd and Violet meet on their journey, the Earth, "is so bad ye gotta leave. Old World's mucky, violent, and crowded," (p. 163). During the novel the reader finds many reasons for people to leave Earth and establish colonies in the New World.

In *The Roar*, a lie was created to allow the most beautiful parts of our Earth to be inhabited by the richest people. Audrey and Mika find this when they return to their training ship to fulfill a promise. Audrey questions,

How can there be trees and houses and people here! It's supposed to be poisoned dust!... Look at it, he [Mika] said angrily. People are dying in The Shadows

because there isn't enough space, while on this side of The Wall, people are living in mansions surrounded by forest! (p. 439)

By the end of this novel the author hopes the reader realizes how important it is to take care of what we have in our world and sees an example of an extreme measure one fictional society takes to keep it protected for the wealthy. We only have one Earth and many of the novels showed the importance of taking care of it. Not only keeping care of what we have now but also being proactive in thinking about what is to come.

Each of the protagonists demonstrated altruism within the novel. This was the most evident in *Tunnels* when Will and his friend Chester get caught in an underground world. While there, Will learns that he was born in The Colony but his mom took him aboveground where he was taken in by a family of Topsoilers (humans living above ground). Will's original family takes him in but cannot take Chester. Living with his original family, Will constantly searches for ways to get Chester out of The Colony. Through the end of the novel Will risks his life many times to save Chester and get him above ground again. At the end of the novel, "Will was content just to be reunited with Chester. Will grinned the widest of grins, luxuriating in a wave of relief that his friend was safe" (p. 467). Will is a good example of how the characters in dystopian novels often think of themselves second to their friends and family. Altruism is a virtue many young adults have a hard time grasping. Many of the novels showed great main characters that show this characteristic. The young adult reader sees a great role model and hopefully strives to be more like the characters in the novel.

Recommendations for Further Study

Numerous dystopian novels are being released so there is a continued need for

evaluation of these types of novels. Many of the novels reviewed were part of a series. Research could be done to determine if themes stay consistent within a series and if lessons go more in depth because of the expanded space. This would be especially interesting if the series uses the same main characters. If the series uses different main characters, the researcher could determine if the themes stay the same or if new ones evolve.

Popularity of these novels is growing as well; a researcher could look at student views of this literature. Do students find the same themes as this researcher? Do the lessons found within this research make a connection with current young adults? What is making this type of literature grow so quickly with this age group?

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APPENDIX A

INITIAL LIST OF BOOKS

*Books chosen for analysis

- Adington, L.J. *Cherry Heaven*. Greenwillow Books. 2008.
- *Anderson, M.T. *Feed*. Candlewick Press. 2002.
- *Bachorz, Pam. *Candor*. Egmont USA. 2009.
- *Clayton, Emma. *The Roar*. Chicken House. 2009
- Collins, Suzanne. *Catching Fire*. Scholastic Press. 2009.
- *Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic Press. 2008
- Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*. Scholastic Press. 2010.
- *Goodman, Allegra. *The Other Side of the Island*. Razorbill. 2008.
- Halam, Ann. *Siberia*. Orion Children's Books. 2005.
- Hrdlitschka, Shelley. *Sister Wife*. Orca Book Publishers. 2008.
- Lott, Tim. *Fearless*. Candlewick Press. 2007.
- Lowenstein, Sallie. *In the Company of Whispers: a novel*. Lion Stone Books. 2008.
- Millard, Glenda. *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark*. Holiday House. 2010.
- *Ness, Patrick. *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. Candlewick Press. 2008.
- Ness, Patrick. *The Ask and Answer*. Candlewick Press. 2009.
- Ness, Patrick. *Monsters of Men*. Candlewick Press. 2010.
- *Pfeffer, Susan Beth. *Life As We Knew It*. Harcourt. 2006.
- Pfeffer, Susan Beth. *The Dead and the Gone*. Harcourt. 2008.
- Pfeffer, Susan Beth. *This World We Live In*. Harcourt. 2010.
- Westerfeld, Scott. *Extras*. Simon & Schuster. 2007.
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- Westerfeld, Scott. *Specials*. Simon Pulse. 2006.
- *Westerfeld, Scott. *Uglies*. Simon Pulse. 2005.
- Wooding, Chris. *Storm Thief*. Scholastic Press. 2006.
- Beale, Fleur. *I Am Not Esther*. Hyperion. 2002.
- Blackman, Majorie. *Naughts & Crosses*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. 2005.
- Booraem, Ellen. *The Unnameables*. Harcourt. 2008.
- *Boyne, John. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas: A Fable*. David Fickling Books. 2006.
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- Goobie, Beth. *Fixed*. Orca Book Publishers. 2005.
- Goobie, Beth. *Flux*. Orca Book Publishers. 2004.
- Harrison, Troon. *Eye of the Wolf*. Fitzhenry & Whiteside. 2003.
- Layne, Steven L. *The Side of Paradise*. Pelican. 2001.
- Mark, Jan. *Useful Idiots*. David Fickling Books. 2004.
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- Stahler Jr., David. *The Seer*. Eos. 2007.
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- Campbell, Ross. *Shadoweyes*. SLG Publishing. 2010

- Condie, Ally. *Matched*. Dutton Books. 2010.
- *Fisher, Catherine. *Incarceron*. Dial Books. 2010.
- Fletcher, Susan. *Ancient, Strange, & Lovely*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers. 2010.
- Fletcher, Susan. *Dragon's Milk*. Atheneum. 1989.
- Gee, Maurice. *Salt*. Orca Book Publishers. 2009.
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- Gordon, Roderick. *Deeper*. Chicken House/Scholastic. 2009.
- Gordon, Roderick. *Freefall*. Chicken House/Scholastic. 2010.
- *Gordon, Roderick. *Tunnels*. Chicken House/Scholastic. 2008.
- Hall, Teri. *The Line*. Dial Books. 2010.
- Heath, Jack. *The Lab*. Scholastic Press. 2008.
- Heath, Jack. *Remote Control*. Scholastic Press. 2010.
- Kostick, Conor. *Epic*. Viking. 2007.
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- Lynch, Chris. *Cyberia*. Scholastic Press. 2008.
- Lynch, Chris. *Monkey See, Monkey Don't*. Scholastic Press. 2009.
- Lynch, Chris. *Prime Evil*. Scholastic Press. 2010.
- Mariz, Rae. *Unidentified*. Balzer + Bray. 2010.
- McNaughton, Janet. *The Secret Under My Skin*. Eos. 2005.
- O'Guilin, Peadar. *The Inferior*. David Fickling Books. 2008.
- *Shusterman, Neal. *Unwind*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. 2007.

APPENDIX B
NOTE TAKING FORM

Title:

Protagonist age and gender:

Theme	Present
Strong female protagonist	
Governmental or political conflict	
Focus on survival	
Strong family or community structures	
Resilience of the protagonist	
Cooperation between young adults	
Conflicts in the teenagers life parallels literary conflicts	
Governmental control	
Strong young adult presence where the reader can empathize with characters	
<i>City vs. Wilderness</i>	
Caste system	
Need for survival	

Additional themes found:

Lessons from the novel:

What is the author teaching the reader?