

Maria Nilson

Resisting Motherhood: Reproduction in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

“Dominant western cultural, political and medical ideologies dictate that all women must want to be mothers.”¹ In modern young adult (YA) dystopian novels we often meet young female protagonists who do everything they can to avoid having motherhood forced on them. Even if reproduction is seldom the main topic of these novels, there is an interesting discussion in them that problematises motherhood, individual desire vs. collective need and what it means to be a woman. Is it necessary to become a mother to fully be a woman, and is it desirable to have children in a post-apocalyptic world? In these novels, young women are not ready to sacrifice their free will and their bodies to replenish the human race.

Following the success of Suzanne Collins’, *The Hunger Games*, dystopian novels have flooded young adult fiction and become very popular. In book after book, strong female protagonists struggle to survive after the world has collapsed. The post-apocalyptic world can vary. It could be a huge wasteland filled with mutant monsters and violent tribes, or a techno-city filled with modern and often terrifying technology, where people’s lives are often highly supervised and controlled by a tyrannical government. Even though the visions of this dystopian future differ, one aspect of the future is constant, namely that a large part of humanity has died, been wiped out by war, plagues or natural disasters, or a combination of these, and there is often a need to make sure that humanity survives by the birth of a new generation. Collins’ trilogy is just one example. Even though reproduction is not a main theme in the novel, the issue is still addressed. In *Mockinjay*, where Katniss finds herself in District 13, she not only finds revolutionaries

looking for more soldiers but also finds an older generation looking for 'breeders'.

They need you. Me. They need us all. A while back, there was some sort of pox epidemic that killed a bunch of them and left a lot more infertile. New breeding stock. That's how they see us.²

Due to the emphasis on the need to replenish the human race, several of these dystopian novels discuss reproduction in different ways. In several novels the heroine faces the risk of being forced into becoming a kind of 'reproduction machine' to ensure the survival of our species - a fate that she always refuses to submit to. This does not mean that there are no young mothers in YA dystopian novels, but when the young protagonist becomes a mother, it is, at least in the books I have studied, always after having sex with a man she loves.

In this chapter several examples from YA dystopian novels are discussed in relation to the complex aspects of reproduction. The selection originates from a larger project of around 150 YA dystopian novels published between 2002-2022. The novels that most clearly discuss reproduction have been chosen for this chapter. These books often incorporate elements from different genres. There are several hybrids combining dystopia with dark fantasy or horror.³ The element of romance is another important part of YA dystopia. That most of the YA dystopian novels discussed here can also be labelled as romance has been discussed before.⁴ However, there has been less academic focus on how the romance elements work in these novels. What happens when these two completely different genres are combined? As the ingredient of romance is important in terms of whether the young heroine chooses to be a mother, I devote a section of the chapter to this particular discussion. The examples discussed are either British or American and, with a few exceptions, are narrated by a first-person female narrator.⁵

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the current research on reproduction in dystopian fiction. Here I say something about the relationship between YA dystopian fiction and the rich tradition of feminist science fiction. After giving several examples of how the young female protagonists resist being forced into becoming reproduction machines, I turn to how motherhood is made possible by discussing how these novels are not just dystopian, but also romance novels. In order to understand why YA dystopian novels often have an ending filled with hope, however bleak and violent they might be, I argue that we need to look more closely at how they are

influenced by the romance element. I also discuss what this hope consists of. Is it hope for the survival of the human race? For a better world? Or is it just a happy ending for the heroine and her true love?

Dystopian mothers

Even though reproduction is an important theme in several of these books, it is seldom a dominant one. However, it is a theme that has often been studied. For example, Berit Åström not only focuses on the relationship between Katniss and her mother in *The Hunger Games* trilogy but also on how Katniss is portrayed as a mother in “Negotiating Motherhood in *The Hunger Games*”.⁶ In her article, Åström analyses the multi-layered bond between mother and daughter, where Katniss often assumes the role of the active and strong one but where her mother also has a power that Katniss needs. The somewhat strained relationship between mother and daughter is a topic that I have discussed in two articles focusing on Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy and Meg Cabot’s *Airhead* trilogy.⁷ Rebelling against one’s mother and her way of being a woman is a visible trait in these novels, and even if Cabot’s series are more entrenched in postfeminism and ideas of “girl power”, we can see evidence of this in Collins as well.

In all dystopian fiction, power structures are not only evident but also a vital part of the story, in that the protagonists either need to fight them or succumb to them. The power structures between adults and adolescents are especially important in YA dystopian fiction as the young characters struggle to survive in a world created by a previous generation. In her study *Mothers and Murderers. Adults’ Oppression of Children and Adolescents in Young Adult Dystopian Literature*, Malin Alkestrand focuses on how the older generation often uses the younger to survive in a world that they themselves have destroyed. She not only discusses how teenagers in dystopian texts are often forced to become killers, but also analyses young mothers. Young mother are particularly interesting as they are often positioned as powerless adolescent mothers who are judged or taken advantage of by an older generation, yet who are also powerful in that they have power over their children.⁸ Alkestrand’s study is based on 101 titles and she discusses YA dystopian novels as a combination of several different genres, such as the adventure novel, the bildungsroman, the romance novel and fantasy.⁹

Mary E. Theis discusses the relationship between mothers and their

offspring in *Mothers and Masters in Contemporary Utopian and Dystopian Literature* and, amongst other things, analyses how the rights and needs of the individual are accentuated in the novel.¹⁰ In *Reproductive Reproduction: Intersectional Maternity in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, Meghan Gilbert-Hickey argues that how motherhood is visualised in YA dystopia is strongly linked to the dominance of white, heterosexual and middle-class characters.¹¹ She also discusses how these books present a multi-layered image of femininity.

If the reader sees, in these books' protagonists, empowered female intersectionality, however, she soon realizes it is merely a surface representation. For she discovers a drastically different message regarding maternity and the confines within which women operate once they become mothers. Motherhood, in these texts, is presented as an imperative. Very few adult women escape that normative role.¹²

How we can understand the young main protagonist's 'escape' from motherhood is something that I address later on in the chapter. With Alkestrand's book as one exception, the previous studies on reproduction in YA dystopias have been focused on one or two novels at a time. In lieu with Alkestrand, I have worked with a large corpus of over a hundred books and have been able to see recurring patterns in a way that is impossible when focusing on a few novels.

From feminist utopia to YA dystopia

Science fiction is all about looking at the universe from different perspectives, about breaking down barriers and considering alternate possibilities [...] SF is about toppling stereotypes and considering alternative futures. It's a genre that by its very nature is open to new ideas, to change.¹³

Science fiction has been used for decades to discuss and critique how we do gender. In order to understand the themes in modern YA dystopian novels we need to look at the fertile ground in which they have grown. There is a substantial amount of research on YA dystopian fiction, most of which consists of articles discussing a few selected works.¹⁴ This might be one reason why the "roots" of YA dystopian novels are seldom more than hinted at. These books do not exist in a vacuum but are both influenced by women's fiction from the 1970s, with writers such as Erica Jong

and Marilyn French writing about female sexuality, desire, and, of course, pregnancy, and by feminist science fiction and dystopian fiction in general.

It is relatively easy to find traces of previous utopian and dystopian texts in the novels discussed in this chapter. We can see traits from early feminist utopian novels like Mary E. Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1890) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), both of which make use of utopian vision to argue for women's rights.¹⁵ There are important visible traces in 'classic' dystopian novels like Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and George Orwell's *1984* (1948). But there are also themes and traits from classic horror, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) to Stephen King's Dark Tower novels. Naturally, there are also traces of feminist science fiction from the 1970s-1980s, with authors like Ursula K. LeGuin, Tanith Lee, and Marge Piercy, even if these are seldom clearly visible in the books I have studied. A few novels are often mentioned directly in the YA dystopian novels discussed here Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is one of these, and a recurring intertext is Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), which among other things discusses reproduction. In this novel, as in so many other, the reproductive "work" women are encouraged to do, are said to be important, but has low prestige.¹⁶ As in so many examples from both feminist science fiction from the 1970s and today's YA dystopian fiction, they are seldom seen as heroes but rather as tools.

For a long time reproduction has been a recurring theme in feminist science fiction.¹⁷ Jane Donawerth argues in *Frankenstein's Daughters* that one of the reasons why Mary Shelley's novel is one of the first feminist science fiction novels is that it focuses on reproduction. The genre offers a playground to experiment with technology, conceptions of the female body and our means to procreate.¹⁸

We often see the 1970s and 1980s as something of a "golden age" of feminist science fiction, although the genre lives on even today. In 2018 Anne Charnock received the A.C. Clarke reward for her novel *Dreams Before the Start of Time*, which focuses on reproduction and how our concept of what a family experiences changes when new technologies emerge. The novel discusses a variety of possibilities. In one chapter, a character adopts an orphan who is left to gestate in an artificial womb. In another, a man creates a daughter using only his DNA. When asked why Charnock's novel was chosen, award director Tom Hunter said that it was an example of "science-literate fiction that embraces the challenge of humanizing big ethical questions".¹⁹ Reproduction has been and still is a subject that challenges

us. Science fiction/fantastic fiction has for a long time provided an arena for discussing different modes of reproduction and how they affect the power dynamics in a society, as well as whether humanity should be saved.

Reproduction has also long been an important question for feminism. In an article on Swedish fantasy and science fiction/fantasy writer Karin Tidbeck, Emma Tornborg argues that speculative fiction, such as dystopian fiction, has been and still is an excellent way of problematising and discussing the norms and ideals of parenthood in general and motherhood in particular.²⁰ One reason is of course the genre's possibility to explore a kind of technology that has not yet arrived but is coming. Barr wrote in 1993: "When feminist science fiction turns its attention to reproductive technology, the differences between fiction and fact become indistinct."²¹ The question is, can new machines be an answer to the repopulation of the planet, and if so, what will that mean for our young heroines? Finding new ways of reproducing has been part of the women's movement. Shulamith Firestone argues in the classic *The Dialectic of Sex* from 1970 that reproduction is the main reason for women's subordination. She states that "[t]he freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible" is the only way that an equal society can be achieved.²² However, in most of the YA dystopian novels that I have studied, technology never provides an answer but rather makes everything worse. In Lauren Destefano's trilogy (which I discuss later on), an attempt to perfect the human race leads to the creation of a virus that could ultimately annihilate it and lead to young women being kidnapped and forced into marriage and childbearing. In Jessica Khoury's *Origin* (2012)²³, Pia is a genetic experiment and told that she is the future of humanity. But when she discovers that dozens of lives have been sacrificed to make her, and that she would be forced to continue taking lives to make similar perfect beings, she refuses. I have yet to find a novel in which reproductive technology is presented as something positive, as a way of not just repopulating the planet but also improving women's lives.

One of the most recurring intertexts in several of the novels discussed in this chapter is one that deals with reproduction and the lengths to which a society might go to replenish the human race, namely Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Sarah Hentges argues that Atwood's text is a clear template for many YA dystopian novels that take up the subject of compulsory reproduction and the enslavement of women for the purpose of reproduction.²⁴

I agree with Hentges that Atwood's novel has had an important impact

on several YA dystopian novel authors. Sometimes this impact is clearly illustrated, as in Alaya Dawn Johnson's *The Summer Prince* (2013), where the society located in Brazil is run by older women called 'aunties' and the heroine June actually reads Atwood's novel at school.²⁵ In most books the connection to Atwood's novel is more subtle, but still easily seen. I will return to Atwood's novel later in the chapter and discuss the YA novels in dialogue with it.

Reproduction machine

In trying to save the human race young women are repeatedly and in a variety of ways abused in YA dystopian fiction. In Ann Carey's *Eve*, the heroine initially thinks that she is being given an education so that one day she will travel to one of the few remaining cities and have a bright future. She lives in an all-female world and is told that men are manipulative and evil, the only exception being the almighty leader of the world. Eve has never had to think about her future: "Ever since I was small, I have been told there was a plan for me – a plan for all of us. Complete twelve years at school, then move across the compound to learn a trade for four years. Then onto the City of Sand, where life and freedom awaited us."²⁶ Eve soon discovers that adults have lied to her, which is a recurring theme in many young adult novels. The truth is brutal:

There would be no trade, no city, no apartment with a queen-sized bed and a window overlooking the street. No eating at the restaurants with the polished silverware and crisp, white linen cloths. There would only be that room, the putrid stink of old bed pans, skin stretched until it cracked. There would only be babies cut out of my womb, ripped from my arms and shuffled somewhere beyond these walls. I'd be left screaming, bleeding, alone and then plunged back into a dreamless, drug induced sleep.²⁷

The girls are kept quiet and happy with dreams of a future until they reach child-bearing age, after which they are chained to a bed, repeatedly inseminated and forced to have child after child. Eve manages to escape this fate in the first book by fleeing before she is forcibly inseminated.

In Emily McKay's *The Farm* (2012), the world is overrun by 'tics' - vampire-like beings that are in constant need of food. The heroine Lily lives in a prison camp where she is forced to donate blood on a regular basis. She knows that when she turns eighteen she will disappear, probably never to be seen again. One way of living a little bit longer is to become a breeder: "As

always, Breeders lounged around the edges of the quad, smugly serene, some of them displaying bellies already found and fertile. They didn't have to worry about eighteenth birthdays".²⁸ But being a breeder comes with a price. The young men in the camp are encouraged to rape these young women as often as they can to get them pregnant. In all likelihood, the children they give birth to will be turned into food for the 'tics'. Even if a breeder lives beyond their eighteenth birthday, they will not reach old age, as giving birth is very dangerous as there are no midwives or doctors to help if anything goes wrong. At the beginning of the novel, Lily has no empathy with girls who choose to become breeders and, in many ways, sees them as enemies, or at least collaborators.

She'd gotten pregnant on purpose. She was trading her life of her unborn baby for a few more months of her own life. The idea as so revolting I couldn't even think about it. The Breeders were the very worst of what was left of humanity.²⁹

However, as the novel progresses and Lily befriends a breeder, she becomes more understanding of other people's choices.

A third example of how the heroines of YA dystopian fiction are threatened by slavery, rape and forced motherhood comes from Lauren DeStefano's *Wither* (2011). In trying to perfect mankind, a technology has been developed that makes 'perfect' children who never get sick and never age. Unfortunately, this technology also creates a virus that kills all girls at the age of 20. Boys survive until they are 25. The heroine, Rhine, is kidnapped at the beginning of the book and forced into a polygamist marriage, as every young girl must bear as many children as possible before she dies.

The girls are taken as young as thirteen, when their bodies are mature enough to bear children, and the virus claims every female of our generation by twenty. Our hips are measured to determine strength, our lips are pried apart so the men can judge our health by our teeth.³⁰

Rhine is married off to Linden, who is already expecting a child with one of his other wives, but at the end of the first book escapes.

In all these examples the heroine is sometimes threatened with rape yet always manages to elude this fate. In the novels we meet several young women who are not so lucky but who are never the main protagonists. It is interesting to note that even if these novels are often very violent and at times contain explicit torture scenes, in only two of the books from my selec-

tion of over a hundred novels is the heroine raped. This may be explained by the genre, in that these books are aimed at younger readers - teenagers and young adults - and rape is a controversial subject in children's and young adult fiction.

An important theme in Atwood's rich novel is how Offred is reduced to a fertile body. That is all that Gilead wants her to be - a fertile and obedient body: "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely."³¹ In Bick's *Ashes*, DeStefano's *Wither* and Carey's *Eve*, the heroine is faced with a future in which she too will be reduced to 'a fertile body', but is given the opportunity to refuse, run away, fight back and, eventually, find true love and sex on equal terms. In "Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels", Sara K. Day argues that these novels often portray sexuality as something dangerous, although they also include a description of how the heroine discovers sex and that this can be empowering.

Being able to recognize and, more importantly, freely act upon desires that are simultaneously codes that welcome and dangerous ostensibly allows young women the possibility of experiencing their bodies in new and empowering ways.³²

When choosing her own partner the dystopian heroine not only has sex, but sex that heals and empowers her.³³ This should be read in contrast to the frequent scenes in which the heroines are threatened by rape. As sex is often used as a weapon to scare/break or impregnate them against their will, several YA dystopian heroines are both frightened by men's sexuality and hesitant to explore their own. But when they fall in love with a young man all this changes. There are female protagonists who not only have sex but are empowered by it, and there are protagonists who (with a few exceptions) have sex if they are deeply in love.

My body – my choice

The three previous examples are all about how young women are forced into becoming mothers and how this, in both DeStefano's and McKay's novels, could lead to rape and ultimately death, a fate the heroines manage to avoid. Young adult literature often discusses choice and control,

whereas in dystopian novels this control is often exaggerated. The societies that the protagonists live in not only control their education or their curfew, but also, for example, who their boyfriend will be.³⁴ With few exceptions, these young heroines fight back. They refuse to submit and instead rebel and express their disgust with the choices presented to them. In Ilsa J. Bick's *Ashes* (2011), an electromagnetic pulse transforms almost every young person into a savage cannibal. Alex, who at the beginning of the novel suffers from a brain tumour and is expected to die, is cured by the pulse and becomes one of the few young people to not be turned into something similar to a zombie. When stumbling upon a village run by old men who have suffered from Alzheimer's but who are now cured and are almost delirious with their newfound strength and virility, she discovers that they have a way of repopulating the planet (or rather, keeping the young cannibals fed by entering into an alliance with them). They simply lock a young woman and a man together in a house, make them a couple and encourage the man to impregnate the woman. The children that are born then have a dual purpose. Some will repopulate the village and some will be offered to the young cannibals as food. Alex refuses to participate: "She didn't want to be given away. And making babies? She couldn't think about that without her skin getting all crawly."³⁵ In the end she manages to run away and escape this fate.

There are very few novels in my selection in which the heroine does not escape and finds some semblance of a happy ending, although they do exist. One is Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* (2014).³⁶ In this future, women are 'grown' in a laboratory and raised to be servants. Every woman is forced by the state to become a companion (which means that they are married off to young men, expected to have as many children as they can and then be terminated at the age of forty), a concubine (which means living for a shorter time in a brothel and being always ready and willing for sex), or a chastity (the women who look after girls until they reach a certain age). The young women, whose names are always written in lower case letters in the text, are manipulated into being constantly frightened, seeking validation and admiring men, so that they can, for example, long for a husband who beats them. Even if the heroine Freida does try to find love, wants to be a companion and enjoys the short life granted to her, she fails and ends up being cut into pieces in a laboratory in order to perfect the process of making these women. O'Neill's novel stands out from other YA novel as it lacks the usual hopeful ending. In this novel, the depicted society seems impos-

sible to change and the future for all women looks extremely bleak. The trait that a society is impossible or at least very difficult to change is a recurring one in YA dystopian novels, but in most examples from my corpus the tragic end from O'Neill's novel is avoided.

The most dominant theme in YA literature is that the heroine refuses to submit to the demands made on her body by the society in which she lives and that she can escape. The 'lesson' that keeps repeating itself is the importance of individual choice; a 'lesson' that is hardly new. When discussing utopian and dystopian novels from the beginning of the twentieth century and onwards, Mary E. Theis argues that: "[...] twentieth century utopian and dystopian writers insist that individuals should not be made to conform; the evolutionary advantage that our species has achieved through voluntary cooperation must not be lost".³⁷ The freedom to choose for herself is one of the main goals of the dystopian heroine. In demanding that they must have the right to choose a 'mate' for themselves and decide whether they want to have children or not, these heroines rebel against the totalitarian society in which they live.³⁸ Two different traits are visible in this. One comes from the popular romance genre in which the female protagonist's right to choose is key, and one is, of course, heavily influenced from popular feminism and its focus on empowerment.³⁹

The freedom to choose is somewhat complicated, though. In Amy Ewing's *The White Rose* (2015), the second book in the Lone City trilogy, we meet a young woman who chooses to comply rather than rebel. This is one example of a hybrid text that combines dystopian elements with dark fantasy and horror. The heroine Violet comes from a poor family and is sold as a slave to the ruling class that cannot reproduce on its own. The fact that having a baby will kill these young women slaves is kept secret. The first book is a rather macabre blend of horrible gynaecology exams, where Violet's new owner, a rich duchess, enjoys torturing Violet as much as she can. There is also a romance story (a surprising part of the plot twist to the story is that the hero is also a slave and has been forced into prostitution). In the second book, *The White Rose*, Violet manages to escape with a few friends and is horrified when one of them, who is pregnant, refuses to terminate the pregnancy.

'Am I not allowed the same choice? Can I not have the same freedom you have? To choose what I want. Choice is freedom, Violet.' I shake my head.
'You're twisting it all up. You don't get to choose to die'.⁴⁰

Sacrificing yourself in order to give life to a child is rare amongst the

protagonists in YA dystopian novels but can be seen in novels aimed for an older audience. In Jane Roger's *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2012)⁴¹, which won the Arthur C. Clarke award in 2012, women no longer survive pregnancies and few babies are born. The government launches a programme in which young women are called to be 'Thornroses', impregnated with embryos and put into a coma until the babies are born – at which point the woman dies. Jessie decides that this is what she wants to do and must fight for her choice when her desperate father tries to stop her. It is a story about a rebellion that ultimately leads to death, as Jessie finally manages to escape from her father and arrive at the hospital. It is important to note that Roger's novel is not labelled YA, and one of the reasons for the ultimately bleak ending where the young girl dies could possibly be explained by that.

Two main themes from Atwood's novel frequently return in YA dystopian novels. One is the idea that we can get 'used to' oppression, that it can become commonplace and that to survive we might be forced to fall into line: "Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary."⁴² In YA dystopian novels we meet heroines who very often go from realising that they are subjected to more control than they previously understood, start to refuse to submit to society's rules and end up rebelling and fighting against control. And their rebellion does change the societies in which they live, at least to some degree. In these novels, being compliant is often seen as almost a cardinal sin. In comparison to *Offred*, the young protagonists in YA dystopian novels are given the opportunity to rebel. These young heroines have a choice and can escape the fate of becoming reproductive machines.

YA dystopia as romance

The fact that most of the YA dystopian novels discussed here can also be labelled as romance has been discussed before. Connecting YA dystopian novels to romance does not simply mean that we have a love story (which is often a love triangle), but also, and more importantly, that in these rather dark novels there is a ray of hope. One of the main building blocks in popular romance is the promise of a HEA-ending, a "happily ever after" where the heroine's and hero's struggles will be rewarded.⁴³ In *Romance Writers of America's* definition of the genre, the fact that the heroine must reach a happy ending is stressed:

An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending – Romance novels end in a way that makes the reader feel good. Romance novels are based on the idea of an innate emotional justice – the notion that good people in the world are rewarded and evil people are punished. In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love.⁴⁴

The love story is often an important part of the novel. In YA dystopian novels the heroine not only fights unjust leaders, wrestles with mutants and zombies, realises that most adults are corrupt and so on, but also falls in love. One way of understanding the romance ingredient in YA dystopian novels is to read it as a way of introducing hope. As the heroine often loses her faith in humanity, falling in love restores at least part of it.

The YA novels discussed here often describe a kind of ‘supersized’ patriarchy, where women are prey. A recurrent theme is that when a disaster occurs and resources become scarce, humanity will revert to what is seen as a “previous” stage, where fighting for your own survival is all that guides you.⁴⁵ The heroines often live in societies in which their bodies are seen as the ‘property’ of men or as a ‘means to an end’, namely having children. There is no respect for their rights and very little compassion. Sexual violence is part of these societies, which makes the romance aspect of these books both interesting and problematic. The young man with whom the heroine falls in love (in most cases the books are heteronormative with a few exceptions) is often situated outside the patriarchal society and is a man who would never see the heroine as prey. There is an interesting resemblance here to modern historical popular romances that often depict a patriarchal society that severely limits the heroine’s right. A happy ending is achieved when she meets a different kind of man; someone who will not abuse his position and who will help her to achieve her goals and at the same time protect her.⁴⁶ But are there HEA-endings in these novels? We have strong rebellious heroines who refuse to submit to tyrannical regimes, battle against oppression and often succeed in changing society – up to a point. Patricia Kennon argues that:

In this genre, optimistic possibilities for emancipatory agency seem intertwined with pessimistic acknowledgments of the limitations for the transformations of society and relationships between generations.⁴⁷

If we take Katniss as an example, she does manage to change society and rid it of two tyrants yet fails to save her sister and the ending is bit-

tersweet. It takes years before she can believe in a future and dare to have children with Peeta. Åström argues in her reading that motherhood is forced on Katniss.⁴⁸ It is Peeta's choice and not hers, which makes the end of the final novels as bleak as those of Rogers.

So, how can we understand the romance in these novels and how is it connected to reproduction? Lauren Penny says: "The new teen dystopias are profoundly romantic, full of doomed crushes and broody heroes in tight athletic suits, but they resist portraying love as the answer to the heroine's problems."⁴⁹ In one sense I agree with Penny that love does not save the day or crush tyrants. However, in dystopian novels aimed at younger readers, love becomes the answer, the reward we might say, that enables a happy ending and gives hope. Love is portrayed as something that heals the heroine after her struggles, and that where there is love there might be children.

In the YA dystopias I have studied there are few mothers, and those who become mothers do so with partners of their own choosing.⁵⁰ An interesting example of how love is needed to reproduce is visible in Moira Young's *Dustland* series, which take place in a post-apocalyptic landscape that echoes the *Mad Max* franchise.⁵¹ Here, the planet has been more or less destroyed after centuries of pollution, mutant creatures have appeared and mankind is struggling. The heroine, Saba, leaves home to save her brother, fights the tyrant De Malo and meets Jack. De Malo is one of many patriarchal leaders who organises people into distinct groups and brands their foreheads. Women can be whores, breeders or midwives. As the breeders are repeatedly raped and forced to have child after child, the midwives are there to keep them in line and take the babies as soon as they are weaned: "Midwives hate their slavery, they hate what they're doing..."⁵²

Saba's project to save her brother becomes complicated and her relationship with Jack sours when she thinks that he has betrayed her. She chooses to have sex with De Malo even if she is on many levels repelled by him, becomes pregnant but miscarries, which might seem like a minor detail, although it carries quite a lot of weight in the story. De Malo is the wrong man for her and Jack is her soulmate. Everyone who reads popular romance will realise that children will only arrive in a relationship that is based on true love, as this is one of the most common tropes in the romance genre. At the end of the trilogy, after De Malo has been killed, Saba leaves with Jack. She therefore gets her happy ending. However, whether she will choose to have children or not is kept from the reader.

Another example of how romantic love makes motherhood something

the heroine chooses is Kim Liggett's *The Grace Year* (2020). Tierney doesn't want to be married off, even if her position in the society in which she lives will be difficult if she is unmarried.

Being married off isn't a privilege to me. There's no freedom in comfort. They're padded shackles, to be sure, but shackles, nonetheless. At least in the labour house my life will belong to me. My body will belong to me.⁵³

In the novel all young girls must live secluded in a forest camp, because this society believes that they have "dangerous powers" that must be quelled before they can marry. During this time the girls drink from a polluted well and many succumb to hallucinations. They are also hunted by men outside the encampment who think the young girls are monsters and who not only kill them but also mutilate their bodies and sell the body parts because they are believed to have magic properties. Tierney meets the hunter Ryker and falls in love with him. They do not have a happy ending as he is killed, but Tierney is pregnant and the novel ends with her giving birth to a daughter who will continue the fight against the oppression of women.

The recurring theme in the YA dystopian novels that I have studied is that the heroine only becomes a mother after having sex with a man she loves. The idea of putting a collective need for more children over her own desire is never an issue in these novels.

Conclusion: A Dystopian Happily Ever After Ending?

In "The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s. Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope", Jane Donawerth argues that feminist dystopian novels of this that decade not only portrayed a nightmarish world in which women had to fight to survive but also included an almost utopian ingredient: "The feminist dystopia of the 1990s is like Pandora's box: the last thing to emerge is hope. These novels make dystopia a place of birth."⁵⁴ In novels by, for example, Ursula K. LeGuin and Marge Piercy, there is always, according to Donawerth, the possibility of another world emerging based on gender equality and respect. The nightmare worlds that are portrayed are never seen as deterministic but as changeable. How does this transfer to the dystopian worlds portrayed in YA fiction?

As mentioned previously, the patriarchal society is often described as "super-sized", hyperbolic and surprisingly dark, as this is YA fiction. Repro-

duction is often a nightmare for the young heroine; a threat that she fights against as it is connected to giving up control of her body and, very often, her life. Only when reproduction is coupled with true love and a partner of the heroine's choice does motherhood become a possibility. Romance enables hope. But the dystopian world is still there. At the end of the novel the world might seem a slightly better place. The young heroines may have had victories, and battles may have been won, but not the war.

In their introduction to *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, Day, Green-Barteet and Monzt argue that: "Even as these young women actively resist and rebel, then, they also tend to accept that they cannot change every aspect of their societies' controlling frameworks."⁵⁵ Most heroines make a difference. They help to topple tyrants and put an end to "hunger games". However, several heroines choose not to try and build a better world but instead leave it behind and choose a quiet life with the man they love. The 'romantic' ending can be seen as both hopeful and happy. There is an "escape hatch" that the romantic element provides, but this escape is for the individual.

In one way, the YA dystopian novel can be read as "darker" than the feminist dystopian novels from previous decades. In the older novels, it is not uncommon for there to be a possibility of a different world based on equality and respect, even if the road to that world is long. In YA dystopian novels this road seems even longer, perhaps because the focus in the end is on the individual's own happy ending.

-
- ¹ Berit Åström. "Negotiating Motherhood in *The Hunger Games*". In *Handmaids, Tributes and Carers: Dystopian Females' Roles and Goals*. Myrna Santos (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishers 2018, p. 10.
- ² Suzanne Collins. *Mockingjay*. New York: Scholastic. 2010, p. 9.
- ³ See for example Sue Corbett. "What's new in YA? Mash-Ups." In *Publishers Weekly*. October 1, 2012, p. 24 – 31. See also Jane Donawerth. "Genre Blending and Critical Dystopia." In *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Raffaella Baccolini & Tom Moylan (ed). New York/London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 29–46, for a discussion about how this kind of genre blending is no new phenomenon.
- ⁴ See for example Katherine R. Broad. "'The Dandelion in the Spring'. Utopia as Romance in Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* Trilogy." In *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults. Brave New Teenagers*. Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad & Carrie Hinz (ed.) pp. 117–130. New York/London: Routledge, 2012.
- ⁵ Kim Wilkins argues in *Young Adult Fantasy Fiction. Conventions, Originality, Reproducibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019 that YA literature differs from literature aimed at an older audience and has the following characteristics: "First, the page extent of the books is generally, though by no means always, shorter than that of most adult books excluding literary fiction and category romance, and the font is sometimes larger. These aspects of the text indicate that the word length is shorter and, by extension, the plot less likely to be complicated by subplots and proliferating viewpoint characters. Second, young adult books also regularly sell at a different price point from adult books [...] Perhaps most significantly, though, YA is recognisable as YA because its narratives are focalised overwhelmingly through teenage protagonists", pp. 6–7.
- ⁶ Åström. "Negotiating Motherhood in *The Hunger Games*", pp. 11–17.
- ⁷ Maria Nilson. "Att flicka sig. Hur flickor gör genus i chick lit och teen noir." In *Flicktion. Perspektiv på flickan i fiktionen*, Eva Söderberg, Mia Österlund & Bodil Formark (ed.) pp. 191–207. Malmö: Universus Academic Press, 2013, and Maria Nilson. "'I am Girl. Hear Me Roar'. Girl Power and Postfeminism in Chick lit jr. Novels." In *Academic Quarter*, Men and Women, Volume 8, Summer 2014 (online publication).
- ⁸ Malin Alkestrand. *Mothers and Monsters in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction. Adults' Oppression of Children and Adolescents in Young Adult Literature*. Stockholm/Göteborg: Makadam Förlag 2021, p. 163.
- ⁹ Alkestrand. *Mothers and Monsters in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, pp. 29–30.
- ¹⁰ Mary E. Theis. *Mothers and Masters in Contemporary Utopian and Dystopian Literature*. Bristol: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.
- ¹¹ Meghan Gilbert-Hickey. *Reproductive Reproduction: Intersectional Maternity in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*. New York: St. John's University, 2016.
- ¹² Gilbert-Hickey. *Reproductive Reproduction: Intersectional Maternity in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*. p. 173.
- ¹³ Connie Willis. "Introduction". In: *A Woman's Liberation. A Choice of Futures By and About Women*. Connie Willis & Sheila Williams (ed). New York: Warner Books 2001, pp. xi–xii.
- ¹⁴ See Alkestrand. *Mothers and Monsters in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, pp. 48–49.
- ¹⁵ See Sylvia Määttä. *Kön och evolution. Charlotte Perkins Gilmans feministiska utopier 1911–1916*. Nora: Nya Doxa 1997, p. 17 and Joanna Russ. *To Write Like a Woman. Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995, p. 11.

- ¹⁶ Lois Lowry. *The Giver*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 1993, p. 48.
- ¹⁷ Jenny Bonnevier. *Estranging Cognition. Feminist Science Fiction and the Borders of Reason*. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2005, Chapter 3. See also Jane Donawerth. "Illicit Reproduction: Claire Winger Harris's 'The Fate of Poseidana'", *Daughters of Earth. Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*. Justine Larbalestier (ed.) Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2006, pp. 20–35.
- ¹⁸ Jane Donawerth. *Frankenstein's Daughters. Women Writing Science Fiction*. New York: Syracuse University Press 1997.
- ¹⁹ Sian Cain. 2018. "A.C. Clarke Reward Goes to 'Classic' Novel that explores the Limits of Pregnancy." In *The Guardian* 18/7. [Accessed: 191214].
- ²⁰ Emma Tornborg. "Moderskapets makt och maktlöshet." In *Feministisk fantastik – en lästlustbok*. Maria Nilson, Helene Ehrlander & Emma Tornborg, pp. 123–136. Lund: BTJ Förlag, 2017.
- ²¹ Marleen S. Barr. *Lost in Space. Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1993, p. 82.
- ²² Shulamith Firestone. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Women's Press, 1979, pp. 221–222.
- ²³ Jessica Khoury. *Origin*. New York: Razorbill 2012.
- ²⁴ Sarah Hentges. *Girls on Fire. Transformative Heroines in Young Adult Dystopian Literature*. Jefferson: MacFarland 2018, p. 33.
- ²⁵ Alaya Dawn Johnson. *The Summer Prince*. New York: Scholastic Inc. 2013, p. 211.
- ²⁶ Ann Carey. *Eve*. New York: Harper 2011, pp. 14–15.
- ²⁷ Carey. *Eve*, pp. 23–24.
- ²⁸ Emily McKay. *The Farm*. New York/London: Penguin 2012, p. 6.
- ²⁹ McKay. *The Farm*, p. 214.
- ³⁰ Lauren DeStefano. *Wither*. New York/London: HarperCollins 2011, p. 2.
- ³¹ DeStefano, *Wither*. p. 63.
- ³² Sara K. Day. "Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels". In *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, Sarah, K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet & Amy L. Montz (ed.), New York: Ashgate/Farnham, 2014, p. 79.
- ³³ Bryan Gillis & Joanna Simpson. *Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature. Reading between the Sheets*, Rowan & Littlefield, 2015, p. 76.
- ³⁴ In Lauren Olivier's *Delirium* (2011) love is seen as a disease. There is a cure for it that also dampens other emotions like aggression and fear. Every young person is evaluated before the forced treatment. The heroine, Lena, perceives this evaluation, where a group of scientists will observe and criticise her more or less naked body, as a violation. Despite this she submits. Even if the main goal is to 'cure' emotions like love, the experts also find a suitable mate for each young person. There is a similar theme in Allie Condie's *Matched* (2010), where the heroine is matched by the government to a young man and expected to marry him. In both Olivier's and Condie's trilogies, the heroine escapes with the help of a young man, a rebel, with whom she falls in love, thus choosing her own mate.
- ³⁵ Ilsa J. Bick. *Ashes*. London: Quercus, 2011, p. 369.
- ³⁶ Louise O'Neill. *Only Ever Yours*. London: riverrun 2014.

- ³⁷ Theis. *Mothers and Masters in Contemporary Utopian and Dystopian Literature*, p. 4.
- ³⁸ Theis. *Mothers and Masters in Contemporary Utopian and Dystopian Literature*, pp. 88–89.
- ³⁹ Sarah Banet- Weiser. *Empowered. Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyni*. Duke University Press 2018, p. 95–128.
- ⁴⁰ Amy Ewing. *The White Rose*. New York: HarperTeen 2015, p. 80.
- ⁴¹ Jane Rogers. *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2012.
- ⁴² Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books 1998, p. 32.
- ⁴³ Pamela Regis. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, p. 9.
- ⁴⁴ Barbara Fuchs. *Romance*. New York/London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 124–125.
- ⁴⁵ Maria Nilson. "Demokrati och dystopi. Om människosyn i moderna ungdomsromaner." *Unga läsare. Läsning, normer och demokrati*. Åsa Hedenmark & Maria Karlsson (ed). Stockholm: Gidlunds Förlag, 2017.
- ⁴⁶ Charlotte Roach. "Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy." In *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2010, online publication.
- ⁴⁷ Patricia Kennon. "'Belonging' in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: New Communities Created by Children." In *Explorations in Children's Literature*, 2005, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 40.
- ⁴⁸ Åström. "Negotiating Motherhood in The Hunger Games." p. 13.
- ⁴⁹ Laurie Penny. "No Wonder Teens Love Stories about Dystopian Futures – They Feel like They're Heading for One." In *New Statesman*, 28 March – 3 April 2014. [Accessed: 180625].
- ⁵⁰ Malin Alkestrand comes to the same conclusion in *Mothers and Murderers* where her three main examples of young dystopian mothers, all become pregnant after having sex with a young man they have feelings for, p. 179.
- ⁵¹ For a discussion about this trilogy see Sonya Sawyer Fritz, "Girl Power and Girl Activism in the Fiction of Suzanne Collins, Scott Westerfeld and Moira Young." In *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, Sarah, K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet & Amy L. Montz (ed.) pp. 17–31. New York: Ashgate/Farnham, 2014.
- ⁵² Moira Young. *Dustlands. Raging Star*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books 2014, p. 234.
- ⁵³ Kim Ligget. *The Grace Year*. New York: Del Rey 2020, p. 10.
- ⁵⁴ Jane Donawerth. "The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s: Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope". In: *Future Females, The Next Generation. New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*. Marleen S. Barr (ed.) London/New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers 2000, p. 62.
- ⁵⁵ Sarah K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet & Amy L. Montz. "Introduction." In *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, Sarah, K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet & Amy L. Montz (eds). London: Ashgate/Farnham, 2014, p. 4.

List of Works Cited

- Alkestrand, Malin. *Mothers and Monsters in Young Adult Fiction*. Stockholm/Göteborg: Makadam Förlag, 2021.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Empowered. Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2018.
- Barr, Marleen, S. *Lost in Space. Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1993.
- Bick, Ilsa J. *Ashes*. London: Quercus, 2011.
- Bonnevier, Jenny. *Estranging Cognition. Feminist Science Fiction and the Borders of Reason*. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2005.
- Broad, Katherine R. "The Dandelion in the Spring? Utopia as Romance in Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* Trilogy." In *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults. Brave New Teenagers*. Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad & Carrie Hinz (ed). New York/ London: Routledge, 2012.
- Cain, Sian. 2018. "A.C. Clarke Reward Goes to 'Classic' Novel that explores the Limits of Pregnancy." In *The Guardian* 18/7. [Accessed: 191214].
- Carey, Ann. Eve. New York: Harper 2011.
- Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*. New York. Scholastic, 2010.
- Condie, Allie. *Matched*. London: Razorbill/Penguin, 2010.
- Corbett, Sue. "What's new in YA? Mash-Ups." In *Publishers Weekly*, October 1, 2012. [Accessed: 181003].
- Day, Sarah K. Miranda A. Green-Barteet & Amy L. Montz. "Introduction." In *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*. Sarah, K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet & Amy L. Montz (ed). New York: Ashgate/Farnham, 2014.
- Day, Sara K. "Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels." In *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*. Sarah, K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet & Amy L. Montz (ed). New York: Ashgate/Farnham, 2014.
- DeStefano, Lauren. *Wither*. New York/London: HarperCollins 2011.
- Donawerth, Jane. "The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s: Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope". In: *Future Females, The Next Generation. New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*. Marleen S. Barr (ed). London/New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers 2000.
- Donawerth, Jane. *Frankenstein's Daughters. Women Writing Science Fiction*. New York: Syracuse University Press 1997.
- Donawerth, Jane. "Illicit Reproduction: Claire Winger Harris's 'The Fate of Poseidana.'" In *Daughters of Earth. Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*. Justine Larbalestier (ed). Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

- Donawerth, Jane. "Genre Blending and Critical Dystopia." In *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Raffaella Baccolini & Tom Moylan (ed). New York/London: Routledge, 2003.
- Ewing, Amy. *The White Rose*. New York: HarperTeen 2015.
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Women's Press, 1979.
- Fritz, Sonya Sawyer. "Girl Power and Girl Activism in the Fiction of Suzanne Collins, Scott Westerfeld and Moira Young." In *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*. Sarah, K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Bartee & Amy L. Montz (ed). New York: Ashgate/Farnham, 2014.
- Fuchs, Barbara. *Romance*. New York/London: Routledge, 2004.
- Gilbert-Hickey, Meghan. *Reproductive Reproduction: Intersectional Maternity in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*. New York: St. John's University, 2016.
- Gillis, Bryan & Joanna Simpson. *Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature. Reading between the Sheets*. Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2015.
- Hentges, Sarah. *Girls on Fire. Transformative Heroines in Young Adult Dystopian Literature*. Jefferson: MacFarland 2018.
- Johnson, Alaya Dawn. *The Summer Prince*. New York: Scholastic Inc. 2013.
- Kennon, Patricia. "'Belonging' in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: New Communities Created by Children." In *Explorations in Children's Literature*, 2005, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 40-49.
- Khoury, Jessica. *Origin*. New York: Razorbill 2012.
- Liggett, Kim. *The Grace Year*. New York: DelRey 2020.
- Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 1993.
- Nilson, Maria. "Att flicka sig. Hur flickor gör genus i chick lit och teen noir." In *Flicktion. Perspektiv på flickan i fiktionen*. Eva Söderberg, Mia Österlund & Bodil Formark (ed). Malmö: Universus Academic Press, 2013.
- Nilson, Maria. "Demokrati och dystopi. Om människosyn i moderna ungdomsromaner." *Unga läser. Läsning, normer och demokrati*. Åsa Hedenmark & Maria Karlsson (ed.). Stockholm: Gidlunds Förlag, 2017.
- Nilson, Maria. "'I am Girl. Hear Me Roar'. Girl Power and Postfeminism in Chick lit jr. Novels." In *Academic Quarter, Men and Women*, Volume 8, Summer 2014, online publication.
- McKay, Emily. *The Farm*. London: Penguin 2012.
- Määttä, Sylvia. *Kön och evolution. Charlotte Perkins Gilmans feministiska utopier 1911–1916*. Nora: Nya Doxa 1997.
- Olivier, Lauren. *Delirium*. New York: Harper Collins 2016.
- O'Neill, Louise. *Only Ever Yours*. London: riverrun 2014.
- Penny, Laurie. "No Wonder Teens Love Stories about Dystopian Futures – They Feel like They're Heading for One." In *New Statesman*, 28 March – 3 April 2014. [Accessed: 2009/25].

- Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2003.
- Roach, Charlotte. "Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy." In *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2010. Online publication.
- Rogers, Jane. *The Testament of Jessie Lamb*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2012.
- Russ, Joanna. *To Write Like a Woman. Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995.
- Theis, Mary E. *Mothers and Masters in Contemporary Utopian and Dystopian Literature*. Bristol: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.
- Tornborg, Emma. "Moderskapets makt och maktlöshet." In *Feministisk fantastik – en lästlustbok*. Maria Nilson, Helene Ehriander & Emma Tornborg. pp. 123–136. Lund: BTJ Förlag, 2017.
- Young, Moira. *Dustlands. Raging Star*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books 2014.
- Wilkins, Kim. *Young Adult Fantasy Fiction. Conventions, Originality, Reproducibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019.
- Willis, Connie. "Introduction". In: *A Woman's Liberation. A Choice of Futures By and About Women*. Connie Willis & Sheila Williams (ed). New York: Warner Books 2001.
- Åström, Berit. "Negotiating Motherhood in *The Hunger Games*." In *Handmaids, Tributes and Carers: Dystopian Females' Roles and Goals*, Myrna Santos (ed). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishers 2018.