Emerging Themes in Dystopian Literature: The Development of an Undergraduate Course

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Thesis Defense
Project Description

• Introduction to the genre and its history
• Discussion of common trends within the genre
• Review of current dystopian literature courses
• Creation of a literature course to be taught by Dr. Tarbox in spring 2015
  ▫ YA Dystopian Literature: A Survey of Modern Book Series
  ▫ Course syllabus and assignments
• Rationale of learning objectives, text list, and assignments
Initial Interests

• YA literature as a whole
  ▫ Teens trying to find themselves through literature and connections with characters

• Personal experiences with dystopian literature
  ▫ 12th grade research project based on *Brave New World* (1932)

• Enjoyment of college-level YA literature courses
  ▫ ENGL 3840: Adolescent Literature
  ▫ TA positions with Dr. Tarbox
Importance of YA Dystopian Literature

• It’s what teens are reading!
  ▫ ...and watching!
• Reflects cultural ideas
  ▫ Projects modern issues to a dramatic level
  ▫ Helps students ponder the “what if” scenarios
  ▫ Incites a need for change
• Echoes worries and issues of adolescents
  ▫ Search for identity, quest for independence, rebelling against higher powers, understanding their place in the world, etc.
• Samples variations of style and treatment of subject matter
Development of YA Dystopian Literature

- Mainstream adult dystopias
- YA dystopian literature began as early as 1970s (Hintz)
  - Credit to Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993) for starting the genre (Alchive)
- Gradual increase after 9/11 attacks (Ames)
- Surge in popularity after Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (2008)
Previous Dystopian Literature Courses

- Utopian and dystopian literature
  - Shared focus on both genres
- Mainstream adult dystopian literature
  - Focus on the classics
- Need for a focus on modern YA dystopian texts
  - Minimal focus on early YA dystopian texts
  - Only one course incorporated modern YA dystopian novels
Need for a YA Dystopian Literature Class

- Limited number of young reader literature courses at WMU
  - Adolescent Literature, Literature for the Young Child, Literature for the Intermediate Reader, & Multi-Cultural American Literature for Children
- Texts would represent modern novels that teens are reading
  - All written after 2008
  - Represent recent trends within the genre
- Book series help to encourage further reading and exploration
  - Promotes learning beyond the course
YA Dystopian Literature: A Survey of Modern Book Series

• Target audience
  ▫ Upper level undergraduate & graduate students
  ▫ Students studying education

• Learning objectives
  ▫ Identify distinctive trends and themes in YA dystopian literature
  ▫ Understand how YA dystopian literature relates to teenagers’ lives and the importance of their connections to the text
  ▫ Learn interpretive skills that will enrich students’ understanding of YA literature as a whole

• Discussion-based class
Text List

- *The Hunger Games* (2008), Suzanne Collins
- *Ship Breaker* (2010), Paolo Bacigalupi
- *The Maze Runner* (2009), James Dashner
- *Matched* (2010), Ally Condie
- *Bumped* (2011), Megan McCafferty
- *Proxy* (2013), Alex London
- *Tankborn* (2011), Karen Sandler
- *BZRK* (2012), Michael Grant
- *Divergent* (2011), Veronica Roth
Surprising Findings

- Gradual increase of YA dystopian texts post 9/11
  - A nightmare became a reality
  - Search for answers or coping mechanisms
- Lack of modern dystopian literature classes
  - Collective focus on adult mainstream dystopias
  - Shared emphasis on utopian and dystopian literature
- Vast selection of modern YA dystopian novels
  - Post *Hunger Games* boom
Closing Remarks

• YA dystopian literature is a rich field of study
  ▫ Enjoyable for teens and adults
  ▫ Provides social commentary on cultural problems
• Teens are reading it, so why is it not being taught?
  ▫ Encourages students to read for pleasure and seek novels outside of the classroom
  ▫ Helps to address and overcome social and cultural issues associated with adolescence
Questions?