

Scary New World

By John Green

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The past year has seen the publication of more than a dozen post-apocalyptic young adult novels that explore what the future could look like once our unsustainable lifestyles cease to be sustained. (Spoiler alert: It's gonna be bad.)

Amid this rising sea of dystopias, two books stand apart: *The Dead and the Gone*, by Susan Beth Pfeffer, and *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins. While some young adult novels are content to read the way bad sci-fi movies look, both these books transcend their premises with terrifyingly well-imagined futures and superb characterization.

Unlike most of the recent dark visionary fictions, *The Dead and the Gone*, a companion to Pfeffer's acclaimed *Life as We Knew It*, explores an apocalyptic event not of our making: in the near future an asteroid hits the moon, changing tides and weather patterns so profoundly that human life in New York City becomes nearly impossible. Seventeen-year-old Alex Morales must take care of his family, because his mother doesn't return home from her hospital job in Queens and his father is missing in Puerto Rico. Alex and his sisters attend Catholic school, and they all struggle with the complexity of faith in the wake of an unbearable (and for most, unsurvivable) act of God. What makes *The Dead and the Gone* so riveting is its steadfast resistance to traditional ideas of hope in children's books — which is to say this is a dark and scary novel.

But it is not without hope. Alex and his sisters receive some assistance from the government: there are weekly, if meager, bags of food for those who stand in line for hours. Most of their help and hope, though, comes from the church, and the tension between faith and disaster keeps the story taut. Pfeffer subtly explores the complexity of believing in an omnipotent God in the wake of an event that, if it could have been prevented, surely would have been.

Some of the plot seems more symbolically resonant than realistic — Alex, for instance, takes coats and shoes from dead people to trade for food, and it's hard to imagine a shoe shortage in a mostly depopulated Manhattan. But the story's climax and resolution feel achingly right. Pfeffer subverts all our expectations of how redemption works in teenage fiction, as Alex learns to live, and have faith, in a world where radical unfairness is the norm.

Suzanne Collins's brilliantly plotted and perfectly paced new novel, *The Hunger Games*, is set much farther in the future but grapples with many of the same questions. Collins, the author of *The Underland Chronicles*, a well-regarded fantasy series, has now written a futuristic novel every bit as good and as allegorically rich as Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* books.

The Hunger Games begins long after the human population has been decimated by climate change and the wars that followed. Now North America is the nation of Panem, a country with 12 fenced-in districts that all work to feed the enormously wealthy and technologically advanced capital. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen lives in District 12, the poorest of them all. Her father died mining in the Seam years ago, and now her family survives thanks to her mother's knowledge of herbal medicine and Katniss's own illegal hunting and gathering outside the district's fence.

The archetype of the girl survivalist is familiar — she’s tough and resourceful, but kind and sentimental. We are put on notice that Katniss is something different in Chapter 1, when she describes a lynx who followed her around while she hunted. In many books, that lynx would be Katniss’s best friend. But not this one: “I finally had to kill the lynx because he scared off game. I almost regretted it because he wasn’t bad company. But I got a decent price for his pelt.”

Long ago in Panem, there was a District 13. The district revolted, and the Capital demolished it and killed all its inhabitants. To commemorate the event — and to remind the districts of its power — the Capital organizes the annual hunger games. First comes the reaping: one boy and one girl are chosen from each district to attend the games. Then the games themselves: a fight to the death among 24 teenage competitors in a sprawling environment controlled by sadistic game masters. The event is watched by the whole nation on live TV.

The winner — and there can be only one — returns to his or her home district triumphant and rich.

When the reaping comes to District 12, Katniss isn’t chosen — but her little sister is. In a harrowing moment, Katniss sacrifices herself to the games instead. She’s certain this is a death sentence — no one from the underfinanced and undernourished District 12 has won in decades. But as the games begin, Katniss’s intelligence and accumulated knowledge about edible plants and hunting become an advantage over the better-fed, stronger kids with wealthy patrons who can send them medicine or weapons.

As the contest progresses, Katniss develops a relationship with the boy from her district. But not even she seems to know whether her feelings are real or faked for the omnipresent cameras.

The concept of the book isn’t particularly original — a nearly identical premise is explored in *Battle Royale*, a wondrously gruesome Japanese novel that has been spun off into a popular manga series.

Nor is there anything spectacular about the writing — the words describe the action and little else. But the considerable strength of the novel comes in Collins’s convincingly detailed world-building and her memorably complex and fascinating heroine. In fact, by not calling attention to itself, the text disappears in the way a good font does: nothing stands between Katniss and the reader, between Panem and America.

This makes for an exhilarating narrative and a future we can fear and believe in, but it also allows us to see the similarities between Katniss’s world and ours. American luxury, after all, depends on someone else’s poverty. Most people in Panem live at subsistence levels, working to feed the cavernous hungers of the Capital’s citizens. Collins sometimes fails to exploit the rich allegorical potential here in favor of crisp plotting, but it’s hard to fault a novel for being too engrossing.

Both Collins and Pfeffer plan sequels to their books — here’s hoping civilization can hang around long enough to publish them.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/books/review/Green-t.html?pagewanted=all>

The New York Times. Sunday Book Review|Scary New World. Search. Subscribe Now. Log In. 0. Settings. Close search. Scary New World. Children's Books. John green nov. 7, 2008. Continue reading the main story Share This Page. Continue reading the main story. The past year has seen the publication of more than a dozen post-apocalyptic young adult novels that explore what the future could look like once our unsustainable lifestyles cease to be sustained. A few years ago, I jumped into the virtual world known as Second Life. I created an avatar that was much thinner, much prettier and decidedly more exotic than I am (she looked a lot more like Angelina Jolie than she did me), and I gave her a cool name. Slowly I began to realize that Margelina, in all her nubile glory, was not alone in her new world. The Almighty Creation Process in Second Life doesn't birth its new beings into a warm and cozy bullpen where they can safely ramp up their virtual socialization skills. It's a scary world Demons everywhere Deep inside a girl So unfair, such an ugly place Only seems to care 'bout a pretty face. [Verse 2] Take a pill to make you brand new But the monsters stay inside you. [Pre-Chorus] They only love you if you follow They only love you if you swallow They only love you if you beg or borrow They only love you when you act so hollow. [Chorus - x2] Hey, beware! It's a scary world Demons everywhere Deep inside a girl So unfair, such an ugly place Only seems to care 'bout a pretty face.