# Fixing tomorrow:
# Teen anxiety and the necessity

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Suzanne Collins writes in *The Hunger Games* that "Destroying things is much easier than making them." Could this one line be the key to understanding the rise in anxiety among young adults? Public health professionals have posited many potential causes for the increase [1-3]. Despite the lack of consensus, I[1] believe young people can and will work through these struggles—and not only for their own sakes, but also so that they might contribute to building a healthier, more just society. Rather than privilege the precariousness of the present, I believe in the potential of reading to empower hope.

In my four years as a literacy educator, I've noticed an increase in students who are afraid to read. The fear manifests in many different ways, but the common is anxiety. Each student has explicitly admitted their anxiousness or implicitly spoken about living an anxiety-riddled life. Encountering these issues in the classroom has been challenging; students actively resist reading because they don't want to confront that which plagues them—their wellbeing under attack.

Three interactions play vividly in my head; all three emphasize the trauma of being an adolescent stuck in a world that forces them to confront their own mortality, with no hope of engaging with idealistic narratives.

A ninth-grade girl sits on her chair curled up into a ball shielding herself from watching a YouTube video of a skydiver. Admitting her anxiety won't let her watch such a death-defying stunt; admitting her anxiety won't let her open *The Undertaking* of Lily Chen.

A ninth-grade girl expresses her want to read. Opening up to me about the library five minutes away from her house, but she has only been there a handful of times because every time she goes, she is lost and confused. The student admits she does not know what she likes to read, and is overwhelmed by the plethora of books. Her only exposure to reading is what is dictated by her teacher--usually books she dislikes because of their foreboding realism.

A tenth-grade boy yells at me. He is upset that I asked him to change the word "gun" in his rap to "roses." Breaking my soul, he confesses he can't think of roses, because the gun is the only way to survive his reality. He blames me for thinking that he can imagine a world where he can just be.

Thinking of these students, and the many others I've had the privilege to teach, it pains me to know the one thing they have in common is that the institution of school has failed to provide them with opportunities to imagine more lucrative stories. The English Language Arts classroom should be a place for wondering about worlds [4, 5] that are bountiful, filled with positivity and love—not a place to emphasize solely the anxiety-inducing realities of our current world. How do we create change and hope instead of reestablishing the horrendous ideologies of humans and society? Can utopian literature—idealistic narratives that imagine sustainable futures—provide the hope needed so that young people "are not distracted by anxiety-provoking thoughts of failure" [5]?

These questions have not been researched or even breached—to my knowledge, no studies have connected utopian literature with the reduction of anxiety in young adults. I will not make this connection here. However, this foray is my attempt to grapple with two parallel concepts that are prominent in young adult lives. I hope doing so starts a conversation about literature's role in public health.

A potent place for this hope to grow is under the umbrella of genres known as speculative fiction—stories that do not presume to be real, but instead engage in creative work to imagine society as if it were otherwise. As such, the genre is considered "politically scrappy, cognitively empowering, and affectively stimulating" [6]. However,

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[1] In this piece, we write in the first person, though the content draws from both of our experiences as educators and scholars.

despite the hope it could convey, the genre is currently dominated by narratives portraying dystopian worlds [7].

This trend is important. Literature rises from specific social conditions; dystopian literature—narratives operating on the brink of hopelessness—can be seen as conveying a "struggle through an exaggerated version of our own lives… [the] non-stop exposure to the world's problems coupled with a personal pressure to be seen fitting in" [8]. Dystopian stories imagine a world in which their characters' wellbeing is under constant threat. *The Hunger Games, Divergent, and the Scorch Trials* series are all recent, popular examples. Is it a coincidence that the rise in instances of anxiety and depression in young people has occurred in tandem with the rising popularity of dystopian fictions?

I can't say for certain, but that these two phenomena developed simultaneously should not go unnoticed.

I can say there are different stories to be read—perhaps must be read—by the young people experiencing unprecedented levels of anxiety and depression: utopian stories.

"Utopia" is a contested term. For this purpose, I define it as any literature imagining a world in which one's immediate wellbeing is not under direct threat. Does this mean that utopian literature for young people is naive or overly idealistic? There is the risk. But I argue that the best utopian writing demonstrates "deliberate and sustained thought" [9] about more hopeful, healthier futures and the processes to build them. Utopian literature can model more fulfilling alternatives for readers and their society [10]—confident, energetic, positive, ongoing, and imperfect.

First introduced to mankind in *Uncanny X-Men* #235 in 1988, the sovereign nation of Genosha served as a utopia for Mutants [11]. As a utopia, Genosha was a place where mutants could thrive without the threat of attack; they could just be. Not a perfect society—Genosha was governed like an East Berlin police state—but still a utopia. Arguing that not everything can be perfect, but one should not feel threatened for just existing, Genosha is the ideal example of a utopia.

"We're surrounded by a culture of ruination, dreams of falling cities, a peopleless world where animals explore" [10]. To create worlds with such destructive depth razes

hope and the ability to participate in healthy collaboration across cultures. Genosha was a catalyst for a healthy, prosperous society. Can we, in 2019, use Genosha as an example to forge a world in which a person's everyday being is not under attack?[2]

Creating this utopia—where one's wellbeing is not under constant threat—in young adult fiction should not be frowned upon but celebrated and embraced. "[Dystopian literature] does not tell us how to build a better world, but how to perhaps avoid continuing to mess up the one we have got" [8]. Likewise, utopian literature should not be considered a cure-all for depression or anxiety. Utopian stories will provide students with the opportunity to fully connect and believe with and in one another without the added responsibility of fixing what should otherwise be basic social functions. Instead of sixteen-year-olds feeling compelled to plan and stage their own protests for climate change, gun control, and access to clean water, they can use their mental facilities to help create utopias that adults in every profession have begun to build. Instead of telling your teacher guns are life and roses are dead, let's change the narrative: eliminate graveyards and cultivate gardens.

I believe stories are the starting place.

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[2] The narrative of high school is "don't fit in, get picked on." Our definition of utopia is: your everyday identification is not attacked. This could potentially lead to lower rates of anxiety amongst young adults.

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