

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



M. Keith Booker. *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994. xiii + 408 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-29115-9; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-29092-3.

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Dystopian Literature links elements in modern cultural criticism with dystopian fiction, drama, and films. Booker discusses important utopias as well as developing a comprehensive discussion of dystopias in a variety of genres, including works of speculative and science fiction, mainstream literature, film, and drama. Booker's discussion of how ideas about culture which are the focus of non-fiction analysis—such as theories of language, gender structures, and class relations—also serve as the subjects of literary texts is a strength. Another strength is his demonstration that utopias and dystopias are not “opposite” since a characteristic which is identified as utopian in one work can be the cause of a dystopian result in another. The summaries of non-fictional and fictional works are clear and detailed, and include important contextual information. The scope of the work is impressive, historically, generically, and culturally. Finally, Booker does not consider the more popular genres less important than the “literary” ones.

The only major flaw is Booker's failure to include works by African Americans. His selections include major and lesser-known works by writers from a number of European countries, as well as America, Japan, Somalia, and England. Booker argues that twentieth-century urban areas such as Joyce's “Dublin,” Dostoevsky's “Petersburg,” and Eliot's “London” are dystopian (p. 175). Given that characterization, I was surprised to see no discussion of the “America” (or “Amerika”) created by African American writers such as Octavia Butler, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker, to name only a few. Overall the work is a valuable one, its major limitation being still shared by many works of literary criticism.

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