Violence has been an important aspect of children’s stories and literature for centuries. Many argue that depictions of violent acts within fictional stories allows children’s minds to process harsh aspects of the world before having to confront them in reality. This literature review will seek out analyses of and opinions on the dramatic rise in dystopian literature for young adults since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the subsequent wars, political unrest, and social upheaval. This literature review is aimed toward an audience of teachers, curriculum developers, librarians, post-secondary students, and educated aficionados of the genre. Sources are arranged by type: books, followed by popular articles, and then scholarly articles.

Two of the most authoritative and frequently referenced sources in the young adult dystopian literature world are books that at first glance appear to be focused on utopian children’s literature rather than dystopian. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry edited a collection of essays titled: Utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults, published in 2003, that has become one of the defining works on the genre. From the Introduction, the editors write that the collection is designed to, “provide a context in which we can appreciate the importance of utopia and dystopia in children’s and young adult literature.”¹ They argue that, through an examination of the available literature, utopias and dystopias are not opposites but rather two sides of the same coin. They also provide an impressive annotated bibliography of utopian fiction works for children. Though this is a vital source for the study of young adult dystopian fiction, it also is unfortunately dated. Published in 2003, this volume misses the YA dystopia phenomenon, to its detriment. There is an e-book version available that is copyright 2013, but does not appear to contain any additional material. We can only hope that an updated version of this wonderful source that directly engages with the new examples of dystopias for young people is forthcoming.

Bringing us a much more up-to-date scholarly inquiry into utopia and dystopia in children’s literature are Clare Bradford et. al. with New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations, published in 2007. These Australian authors explore the topic through literature from across the world, bringing a global perspective to our young adult dystopian genre that tends to be very centered on the Western world, especially the United States. Yet unlike many other sources reviewed here, the authors conclude this book on a more pessimistic note, writing that the transformative power of utopian and dystopian fiction is diminished by conservative ideologies and the unwillingness of authors to be daring.

¹ Hintz & Ostrey, p2.
A 2007 book from Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*, contains several chapters that are useful to our discussion. Though the book is aimed largely at elementary children’s literature, Chapter 4; “Useful Idiots: Interactions between Youth Culture and Children’s Literature,” is primarily focused on adolescent literature and the interplay between sociopolitical considerations and what young adults are reading. This chapter offers an analysis of adolescence, adolescents, and their rapidly changing worldviews that is unique and very useful to this literature review. It examines young adult dystopias indirectly through this study of teenagers, and also touches on the genre in two other chapters that are relevant to this literature review: “Frightening Fiction: The Transformative Power of Fear,” and “Back to the Future? New Forms and Formats in Juvenile Fiction."

The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature (2010), edited by Gregory Claeys, is an excellent reference source for utopian and dystopian literature from Plato through Margaret Atwood. Despite its recent publication date, it is somewhat dated and has very little to offer on the new fiction aimed at children and teens. However, given that many of the sources that are engaged in current discourse about young adult dystopias rely heavily on the cannon of science fiction and utopian/dystopian fiction of the mid- to late-twentieth century, this guide is a valuable source of useful background material. It traces the genre from the earliest concepts of utopia to the unignorable works of Wells and Orwell.

Editors Carrie Hintz, Balaka Basu, and Katherine R. Broad offer a recently-published (2013) book as a part of the Routledge’s Children’s Literature and Culture series, which exists to promote original research in young adult and children’s literature studies. *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* is a collection of essays that explore various aspects of the young adult dystopia literary genre, primarily considering titles published since 2000, though not neglecting several earlier novels that were highly influential on current trends, including Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* and George Orwell’s *1984*. Each essay is focused on several specific titles as exemplars for considering a certain topic within young adult dystopias, including romance, race, environmentalism, socioeconomic disparity, and science & technology. Of particular interest and relevance to this literature review are chapters two, ten, and twelve, which examine government overreach and policing specialness, child sacrifice and scapegoating, and implications of the postmodern/posthuman world, respectively. This is a thoughtfully edited collection that freely acknowledges that it contains contrasting/contradictory opinions, but was constructed purposefully to explore the central issues of a resurgent genre that is part of an evolving conversation.²

Even the heavy-hitters in the popular news and book review world have weighed in on young adult dystopic fiction. Three good opinion/review pieces are *Fresh Hell*, written by Laura Miller and appearing in The New Yorker in June, 2010; *Darkness Too Visible* by Meghan Cox Gurdon, published on The Wall Street Journal: Bookshelf in 2011, and Laurie Penny’s *No wonder teens*

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² Basu, p.12.
*love stories about dystopian futures – they feel like they’re heading for one*, printed in the New Statesman the week of March 28- April 3, 2014.

Miller’s piece examines the changes in dystopian fiction novels for teens over the past few decades and also compares the newer YA dystopias to the similar stories for adults, stating that: “Dystopian fiction may be the only genre written for children that’s routinely less didactic than its adult counterpart.” Much of her article focuses on Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy of novels and utilizes the story to examine the genre as a whole. She argues that young adult dystopias are an allegory of the current adolescent experience, rather than simple entertainment with shock value.

Alternatively, Meghan Cox Gurdon argues passionately that the increased violence, profanity, and challenging social themes are inappropriate for the young adult audience and have been pushed into new children’s fiction by publishers for the sole purpose of selling more books. She sharply criticizes the ALA’s annual challenged book list as well as librarians and booksellers who keep these new, darker novels on the shelves. Where Laura Miller says that the storylines of young adult dystopian novels “become perfectly intelligible” when viewed in the context of teens’ social and emotional struggles, Gurdon remarks: “If books show us the world, teen fiction can be like a hall of fun-house mirrors, constantly reflecting back hideously distorted portrayals of what life is.” She argues that teen fiction brings unhappiness into teenagers’ lives, rather than reflecting the turmoil they already feel. Her article also includes brief synopses of several books she recommends for young readers in a sidebar.

Laurie Penny brings us the most recent of these three genre reviews, and also offers the most cogent analysis. She focuses much of her article on the heroines of *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Bone Season*, contrasting them with the female protagonist of *Twilight* and briefly examining the new feminist slant to teen fiction. She summarizes the prevailing opinion about young adult dystopian fiction eloquently when she writes:

“There are clear reasons why this sort of story is appealing. The complete collapse of the narrative of what a secure future looks like for today’s young people and the grim messages about what the teenagers who grew up with Occupy and austerity have to look forward to as the planet heats up, the job market stutters, pension provision is depleted and the police get meaner have fostered a generational anxiety about how to cope with overmighty state power. These stories function both as manifesto and pressure release valve.”

Amy Sturgis wrote a very scholarly-feeling article for Reason Magazine in October 2014 titled, *Not Your Parents’ Dystopias*. She examines the new rise in young adult dystopias by contrasting them with older utopian, dystopian, and science fiction works in order to reach her conclusions about the world views of teens and adolescents. She argues that the previous decades’ dystopic depictions were balanced by “sensawunda,” or works that convey a sense of

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3 Penny, Laurie. *No wonder teens love stories about dystopian futures – they feel like they’re heading for one* 28 March – 3 April 2014. NEW STATESMAN
wonder about the future. The only similar comparison in today’s fiction are fantasy novels, but she claims that they do not effectively balance the bleakness of young adult dystopias as effectively as sensawunda did. She also considers the role of technology and science in the new YA literature, and agrees with other sources that scientific advancement is often shown as the problem rather than the solution. Teens are raised in a society that is becoming increasingly dependent on technology, but Sturgis writes that there is a burden of guilt placed on young people for the negative repercussions of these technological advancements, and the depiction of science as a key element of a dystopic society is a reaction to these conflicting emotions.

When we think of iconic young adult novels, one of the very first series’ that comes to mind is J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books. Though they are clearly not part of the young adult dystopian genre, the span of their publication dates and their wild popularity can give us an idea of how substantially September 11, 2001 and subsequent world events influenced children’s literature. Courtney B. Strimel published her scholarly article, The Politics of Terror: Rereading “Harry Potter” in the March 2004 volume of Children’s Literature in Education. She argues that, “the overriding theme of the Harry Potter series is coping with terrorism.” Indeed the United Kingdom had already dealt with terrorism within its major cities years before the attacks on New York, so it is unsurprising that a British series of young adult books would seek to create a safe space in which children could develop coping strategies to deal with frightening things. However, the final three books of the series were published from 2003 to 2007, which is well into the timeframe when we see young adult dystopias on the rise, and they were often criticized for being too dark. I think we can view Harry Potter as a precursor series to the new dystopian novels that this literature review explores.

Through the process of this literature review, I discovered that there is very little scholarly literature that directly addresses the driving forces behind post-9/11 young adult dystopian fiction. However, there has been some thoughtful study into the use of bibliotherapy and targeted literature to help younger children grapple with the frightening events of that day and the following social challenges. Three of those sources have been included in this literature review for several reasons. First, this is a group of sources that can be a great use to educators, and the analyses provided in these sources can be extrapolated to young adult dystopian novels. Secondly, the target audience of young adult dystopian novels are teens who were elementary-aged children on September 11, 2001; I believe that understanding what juvenile literature was available to them and how the War on Terror was presented to them in the classroom can provide some valuable information about why they are so enthusiastically reading dystopian fiction today.

The first of these education-oriented sources is an article written by Mary Taylor Rycik and published by Childhood Education in 2006, titled: 9/11 to the Iraq War: Using Books to Help Children Understand Troubled Times. Rycik examines different types of juvenile literature on the subjects of 9/11 and the Iraq war and provides excellent concise summaries of their

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4 Strimel, p37.
contents. She concludes the article with a survey conducted of K-12 teachers about the types of discussions they held in their classrooms and the types of materials used to engage their students with the events of 9/11 and the war in Iraq.

The next of these juvenile education focused articles is one written by Abigail McNamee and Mia Lynn Mercurio titled, Picture books: Can They Help Caregivers Create An “Illusion of Safety” for Children in Unsafe Times? This article was published through Penn State’s Urban Education Journal in 2009. It contributes to the discussion of what role juvenile literature plays in a climate of fear, and provides a detailed breakdown of steps that educators should use to select appropriate fiction material for children grappling with tragedy or disaster. It then reviews several juvenile picture books that address war, peace, and terror. The authors provide a good look at child psychology and how fear should be accommodated by educators differently at different developmental stages.

The final source within this group is somewhat more relevant to our exploration of young adult dystopian fiction as it is an article discussing war fiction intended for children. Kristine Miller’s Ghosts, Gremlins, and “the War on Terror” in Children’s Blitz Fiction was published in the Children’s Literature Association Quarterly Fall 2009. In it, the author engages with concepts that mirror many of those that are discussed as inciting factors behind the production and popularity of new young adult dystopian fiction. She says, “I argue that children’s war fiction makes plain the task of war fiction more generally: rather than offering an escape from violence, the literature helps readers to think constructively about a world being destroyed.”

Though she is specifically focused on fiction, both old and new, that depicts the London blitz bombings of WWII, the themes are remarkably similar to those of YA dystopias. She discusses the role of fantasy and magic in this sub-genre, noting that two of the newest young adult blitz war novels use magical time travel to interact with the London Blitz, effectively allowing readers to analyze and consider the events from a space of safety. The major difference is that these novels look back to try to make sense of horrors that have already occurred, where dystopias look forward to try to imagine what horrors may come. Yet both allow young people to seek a social place for themselves in a topsy-turvy world, and to safely contemplate how they want to shape the future when it is finally theirs to change. This article provides an interesting look at similar fiction with similar aims that does not use utopic or dystopic settings, and could be a valuable reference point for examining the underlying social forces driving the creation and consumption of dystopian fiction.

A source that attempts to use quantitative data to examine a new genre of literature, The Other Side of Dark: Is It Really the End of the World? Examining the Nature of Young Adult Dystopian Literature appeared in the Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA) August 2012 publication, written by Gann and Gavigan. This is a relatively short article authored by two Library Science scholars, and it attempts to characterize the emerging genre of young adult dystopia through a formal research study. The first part of the study presents an analysis of the number of literature awards that were given to YA dystopian literature as a share of the total

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5 Miller, K. p273.
number of awards given; unsurprisingly, these figures show a marked increase beginning in 2003 but really skyrocketing after 2010. The second part of the study is more qualitative and seeks to define the general characteristics of the YA dystopian genre through an examination of four representative titles. They conclude with distinctions between dystopian novels intended for teens and for adults, noting that the young adult versions are consistently more hopeful in their endings and possess a strong protagonist who fights for change, rather than the bleaker outcomes of weaker protagonists who often decide to accept their fate in adult dystopian fiction.

Melissa Ames’ “Apolitical” Adolescents: Analyzing the Popularity and Educational Potential of Dystopian Literature Post-9/11, published in The High School Journal in Fall 2013 cites numerous studies and statistics to argue that the notion of young adults as uninvolved in politics is incorrect. She believes that the popularity of young adult dystopian fiction indicates that young people are more engaged with political thought than many people think. This article specifically addresses the post-9/11 climate as a driving force behind the rise of young adult dystopias; Ames writes that young adults live in a climate of fear perpetuated by legislation such as the Patriot Act as well as the 24/7 news cycle, and that dystopian fiction is a response to this climate. She also addresses some questions of how to use young adult dystopian novels in the classroom and critiques five of the most popular ones available. This is a thoroughly researched, well-organized, scholarly article that accomplishes its goals without being vague or using unnecessarily complex language.

A unique source that is included in this literature review is an undergraduate research project from Kara Hemphill, 2015 graduate from the University of Akron with a degree in English. Hemphill examines gender roles in six recent young adult dystopian fiction novels in her research project titled, Gender and the Popular Heroines (and Heroes) of the Young Adult Dystopia. There is a surprising amount of interest in the available literature about feminism and shifting gender roles within the new young adult dystopian genre. Perhaps this is a reaction to female subjugation in extreme religious orders, which is an issue that has come under increased scrutiny as the social causes and implications of terrorism have received more attention in recent years. Or perhaps the very nature of a dystopic world, one in which many social norms have been turned on their heads, lends itself to an open exploration of gender-based biases and oppression. Regardless, it is a fascinating topic within the larger discussion of young adult dystopic literature, and Hemphill’s work offers a remarkably sophisticated analysis. Her writing is more accessible than much scholarly work, and this is an excellent source for a broad audience. This literature review does not intend to focus on specifically on gender, but for additional in-depth reading on feminism and gender politics, Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction (2014), edited by Sara K. Day is recommended.

Finally, in their article, A World Neither Brave Nor New: Reading Dystopian Fiction after 9/11, published in Partial Answers in January 2006, Sicher and Skradol embark on a probe into the intersection between the imagined future in dystopian fiction and catastrophic realities. The article seeks to illuminate how dystopian stories are perceived after disasters similar to those depicted in the fictional tales actually occur and they describe a phenomenon of reality
intruding on the imagined future. The authors present a fascinating conception of dystopian literature that will be critically challenging for most readers; the article is quite philosophical, and even Freud makes several appearances.

Although this source is concerned with older dystopian fiction intended for adult audiences, it poses a wonderful question that is equally applicable to young adult dystopian novels: how will these texts be viewed in the future? If the unthinkable were to happen, how will we approach these novels afterward? As a scholar of both literature and history, I am fascinated by the way in which fiction passes from popular pastime to historical reflection. Literature allows us a glimpse into the minds of past societies; it is intriguing to imagine how the new burst of young adult dystopian novels, which are so concerned with the future, will one day illuminate the past.

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