

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

The Dystopian Impulse
in Modern Literature
Fiction as Social Criticism
M. Keith Booker

M. Keith Booker. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994. 197 pp , , .

Reviewed by Richard Tuerk

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M. Keith Booker's *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* is an outstanding volume in Greenwood Press' series on the study of science fiction and fantasy. Booker gives interesting readings of a number of extremely important dystopian works, including such classics as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*. He also treats a number of dystopias he classifies as modern and postmodern, including Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s, *Player Piano*, Vassily Aksyonov's *The Island of Crimea*, Vladimir Voinovich's *Moscow 2042*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. His major contribution, however, is to place the dystopias he treats in the context of modern and postmodern critical theory.

Booker sees "defamiliarization" as central to dystopian works, explaining that "by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide

fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable." Accordingly, although his book gives insightful literary readings of the works he treats, he is more concerned with viewing them as social and political criticism. Although he is not the first to argue that dystopian fiction is not a "marginal genre," he argues the case forcefully as he explores the close connections between dystopian and utopian thought and literature.

His main contribution lies in placing dystopian thought and literature in the context of the work of theoreticians like Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and Habermas. Sometimes, however, he gets carried away by the theoretical implications of the material he treats. For example, he writes of "the Foucauldian attempts of the dystopian governments of Zamyatin and Huxley to administer, rather than repress sexuality," apparently converting Foucault into a being who transcends time

and space. Similarly, he writes that in *1984* the Party's belief "that sexuality is an important area in which individuality might arise recalls Foucault." Nonetheless, at the heart of Booker's argument lies the distinction between Freud's observation that modern government tries to repress sexuality because it sees it as a source of "powerful *subversive* energies" and Foucault's observation that modern government tries not to repress but "to administer sexuality and turn sexual energies to its own advantage." In work after work, Booker shows government trying to use sexuality to its own advantage, even in works like *1984*, where the Freudian idea is so obviously present on the book's surface.

Booker's readings are often exciting, and his demonstrations that dystopian works deal with many of the same issues that modern critical theory treats are refreshing. At the same time, he shows continuity between the works he treats, including direct allusions to the earlier ones in many of the later ones. On the whole, Booker's is a highly readable, extremely interesting text that contains many new insights into dystopian thought and literature. It also contains a very useful bibliography.

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