

## Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World



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SINCE the 19th century, liberal humanist thought has encouraged the view that the ideal human being is unified, authoritative, and entirely autonomous (and generally male, white, and heterosexual). Not only does this favor a certain type of individual, but it also promulgates speciesism and fails to account for the ways in which our bodies interact with other forms of matter and different environments. Posthumanism, in contrast to traditional humanism, approaches the human as a hybrid, boundless subject. Through this lens, scholars critically examine the relationship between human beings and their environment, technology, and other species.

In *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*, editors Anita Tarr and Donna R. White have compiled twelve essays that emphasize the unique applicability of posthumanist thought to the study of young adult literature, where issues related to the changing body are paramount. Following a comprehensive yet concise introduction in which Tarr and White define the many forms of posthumanism, the collection is divided into four parts. Part one, “Networked Subjectivities,” includes two chapters that theorize a posthuman understanding of subjectivity—one that moves away from the singular self to an ethical understanding of one’s plurality. Mathieu Donner, in his reading of Octavia E. Butler’s *Mind of My Mind* (1977), questions the possibility of achieving unity without sameness, and Shannon Hervey reflects on social media as a type of collaborative, networked self-writing.

“The Monstrous Other: Posthuman Bodies,” the second part of the collection, contains five chapters that deal with adolescent bodies that are transformed either through magic or medicine. Several of the chapters look at material embodiment in Marissa Meyer’s *Cinder* (2012) and Julianna Baggott’s *Pure* (2012), while others look at Leigh Bardugo’s *Grisha* trilogy (2012-present), Michael Grant’s *Gone* series

(2008-present), and works by Nancy Farmer. A unifying concern among the chapters in this section is how to manage the dangers inherent in an increasingly technologized society. Part three, “Posthumanism in Climate Fiction,” collects Lars Schmeink’s “Coming of Age and the Other: Critical Posthumanism in Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* and the *Drowned Cities*” and Phoebe Chen’s chapter “Posthuman Potential and Ecological Limit in Future Worlds.” Both of these chapters are concerned with posthumanism as a political movement with a *zoe*-centric worldview and agenda. The final part, “Accepting/Rejecting Posthumanist Possibilities,” features three chapters that cover both film and literature: Ridley Scott’s *Prometheus* (2012), Lev Grossman’s *The Magicians* (2009), and novels by China Miéville.

As evidenced here, the collection as a whole provides interdisciplinary insight into a significant number of understudied young adult texts. Posthumanist theory is dense and complex, and this collection offers an accessible and beginner-friendly introduction to the discipline. From defining key terms and the different branches of posthumanist thought to drawing attention to key scholars in the field—such as Pramod K. Nayar, N. Katherine Hayles, and Cary Wolfe—the introduction does an excellent job of preparing readers for the chapters included here. That said, for scholars familiar with posthumanism, the theses and general observations made by the authors are in danger of coming across as obvious or derivative.

Many of the chapters included here still find themselves asking, in a very basic manner, what it means to be human, to be posthuman. Consequently, the authors speak to the same theories and conversations that have been in circulation for the past few decades, without providing us with new readings, just merely old readings of new texts. One of the more novel points the collection posits is that posthumanism must incorporate liberal humanism into its being, “as part of the assemblage” (White 153). What this necessitates, however, remains unresolved.

There are several other problematic aspects of Tarr and White’s collection, the first being that there is a sustained attention to technology as disturbing and negative. Although posthuman bodies are nothing new, the proliferation of technology and climate change has forced us to acknowledge posthumanist concerns with greater urgency. Yet, for some reason, this reality—as presented in this collection—is regularly regarded with distrust and fear. A lone voice among the host of scholars here, Lars Schmeink, rightly urges readers to recognize the “possibility of utopian hope in the face of dystopian systems” (177).

The second major concern involves the application of the label *young adult* to texts that do not necessarily fall into that category: Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* and Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*. Torsten Caeners, in his chapter on *Prometheus*, spends only one sentence defending the inclusion of this text in a YA collection. Caeners holds that it is young adult fiction because "it focuses on one of the major themes of young adult fiction . . . finding one's identity" and is "readily available to all audiences" (199). Not only does this present a simplistic understanding of YA literature, but it also broadens the category to such an extent that nearly any text can be read as young adult. Meanwhile, Tony M. Vinci, in his reading of *The Magicians*, offers no reason whatsoever for reading Grossman's series as young adult. It is, and always has been, marketed as an adult series, and to include it here merely because it's a magic school story suggests, once again, ignorance of what young adult literature entails.

It is difficult to recommend the collection *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*, especially at the price point. For individuals unfamiliar with posthumanist theory, the introduction is valuable, and the third part on climate fiction provides the best example of the positive potential of posthumanist thought. However, for a handful of essays, the collection, for individual purchase, is passable. It would be best suited for university libraries, as individuals can pick and choose what to take from the collection. While recognizing the possible dangers that technology can bring, we in the (post)humanities must begin to move forward and cultivate a positive, hybrid understanding of embodiment—something that, unfortunately, this collection illustrates is not likely to happen any time soon.