

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



February 19, 2011

# Teenage Wastelands

By **CHARLES McGRATH**

**Vampires live forever**, but vampire novels, even ones as popular as the “Twilight” series, eventually molder just like everything else, so publishers of young-adult fiction and the moviemakers who find inspiration from them have already moved on from fantasy about the undead to science fiction. A harbinger of what’s to come is “I Am Number Four,” based on the novel of the same title, which just opened in theaters. “I Am Number Four,” sold to DreamWorks even before it found a publisher, is ostensibly the work of one Pittacus Lore, an extraterrestrial. It’s really by **James Frey**, the author of the factually challenged memoir “A Million Little Pieces,” and Jobie Hughes, a minion hired as part of Frey’s latest project: Full Fathom Five, a literary sweatshop modeled on **Damien Hirst**’s art factory and designed to churn out Y.A. material for books, movies and TV.

The novel, the first of a projected series, frequently reads like an assembly-line product, poorly written and thinly imagined, but it has one diverting idea. While lots of high-school students sometimes feel like aliens, the protagonist of “I Am Number Four” really is one. John Smith, as he calls himself, is No. 4 on a hit list compiled by assassins from a rival planet and is hiding out on Earth, trying to pass as a normal high-school student in Paradise, Ohio, even though he is fire-resistant and telekinetic and, embarrassingly, his hands glow in the dark. He probably ought to confine his romantic attentions to his own kind (girls on his home planet love “differently,” readers learn), but as tends to happen in the vampire novels, he develops strong feelings for a human girl and she for him, and this is what drives the plot forward into the next volume. In the realm of Y.A. fiction, the series is the grail; the single-volume one-off is a lost franchise.

“I Am Number Four” came out in August, a few months before a much better book, “Matched,” also the first in a planned series, by Ally Condie. It, too, was quickly snapped up by Hollywood. The impediment to true love here is the Society, a Big Brother-like entity that chooses your mate for you as soon as you turn 17. The world has apparently barely survived a period called the Warming, partly brought on by too much technology, and the Society that the key to survival is simplicity and restricted choice. All of culture has been taken down, like an Advanced Placement curriculum, to just 100 of everything: song;



OPEN

MORE IN M  
**Your F  
Would**  
Read More

paintings, poems. Cassia, the protagonist of the novel, yearns, not unreasonably, for a little more variety and is also torn between the boy the Society has picked out for her and another, a member of a social class known as Aberrations, not considered suitable for reproduction.

With its echoes of Orwell and Huxley, “Matched” represents a trend in young-adult fiction actually more persistent and highly developed right now than Frey’s vision of lovelorn visitors from another galaxy: sci-fi novels of teenage dystopia in which everyone is an alien, or feels like one, in a false, stage-managed world run by adult authority that is remote, controlling and unfeeling. Where grown-up dystopian novels — books like “Oryx and Crake,” by [Margaret Atwood](#); “The Pesthouse,” by [Jim Crace](#); and “The Road,” by [Cormac McCarthy](#) — lately seem to dwell on a vision of a bestial, plague-ridden world where civilization has collapsed, these new Y.A. books imagine something far worse: a world where civilization feels an awful lot like high school and everyone is under pressure to conform. Another popular series, for example, is Scott Westerfeld’s “Uglies” books, about a world where all 16-year-olds undergo extreme plastic surgery to adapt them to a universal standard of beauty. And in “The Hunger Games” trilogy, by Suzanne Collins, so far the best of the teen dystopian novels (the movie version of the first book is projected to open about a year from now), adolescence is a kind of life-and-death popularity contest.

Here again, there is an authoritarian governing body, the Capitol, headed by the creepy President Snow, which once a year puts on a nationally televised gladiatorial contest in which 24 children, chosen more or less at random, fight in an outdoor arena until only one is left alive. Before the contestants go out to compete, in a spectacle that is supposed to unite the entire country, they’re given fashion makeovers, go to glitzy parties and are extensively interviewed: they become celebrities and, by creating public personas for themselves, compete for sponsorships that may help them survive the battles ahead. Katniss, the protagonist, is so mixed up from pretending to love a fellow contestant that she no longer knows what she feels.

Sound familiar? “The Hunger Games” reminds you of both “Survivor” and the great Shirley Jackson story “The Lottery,” and maybe a little of “The Bachelorette.” Part of its cleverness is the way it taps into the same themes of anxiety and fear of elimination. This story, too, has a teenage protagonist trying to choose between two romantic partners, but much of the interest comes from its persistent teasing out of a premise that is a twist on the old dorm-room speculation about whether life might be a dream: what if there was a reality show that really was — you know, real?

What distinguishes this kind of dystopian fiction from its adult counterpart — beyond its being less dire and apocalyptic — is a certain element of earnestness, even preachiness, and the moral is pretty transparent: be yourself. That’s because most young-adult novels are not written by

young adults. They're grown-up guesses or projections about what we suspect or hope might be on the minds of teenagers, or they're cynical attempts to plant a profitable notion there. Frey didn't have to do much more than think "vampires = aliens" before calling in someone to write it up for him.

But inevitably such books reveal something about our grown-up preoccupations too. For one thing, they suggest we're possibly more worried than our children are about caving in to authority and about finding the right person to love. And "The Hunger Games," besides dwelling, like so many of these books, on the age-old American concern about phoniness and authenticity, also points out the dark, scapegoating side of our preoccupation with reality shows, especially elimination contests like "American Idol" and "The Biggest Loser." We like for there to be winners, but even more we love for there to be losers, as long as they're not us.

*Charles McGrath, a writer at large for The Times, last wrote for the magazine about Hugh Hefner.*