



THE SURGE IN LITERARY ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUTH: A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

*Literature has since itinerary sustained an integral source of intellectual, and thought-provoking influence among the masses. This article explores the resurgence of complex literary themes in 21st-century popular fiction and their resonance with Millennial and Gen Z readers. Focusing on works such as *The Secret History*, *The Midnight Library*, *Babel*, *Normal People*, and *The Hunger Games*, the study examines how contemporary novels reframe 19th-century concerns—political critique, existential dread, feminism, and class consciousness—within narratives that reflect current generational anxieties. Drawing on critical reviews and cultural commentary, the paper argues that these novels serve as reflective tools, offering young adults a means of engaging with issues of identity, precarity, and resistance in a volatile global context.*

Keywords

Literary engagement, Contemporary novels, Class consciousness, Identity, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

In the early 21st century, popular fiction has undergone a striking transformation: novels once categorized as genre or young adult literature are now increasingly recognized for their intellectual and emotional depth. This shift has been most apparent among millennial and Gen Z readers, who have gravitated toward narratives that fuse gripping storytelling with weighty philosophical, political, and social themes. From dark academia thrillers to speculative dystopias, these works channel the anxieties and aspirations of a generation grappling with instability, inequality, and existential dread. Critics and cultural commentators alike have observed how contemporary authors are engaging—often explicitly—with the legacy of 19th-century literature, not only in terms of themes like class struggle, nihilism, and gender politics, but also in the way these novels function as moral inquiries and reflective tools.

This paper examines how novels such as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*, R.F. Kuang's *Babel*, Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* embody these trends. Through close reading and engagement with critical sources, it argues that these works revitalize classical literary concerns while resonating powerfully with the social and emotional conditions of modern youth. Far from escapist entertainment, this new wave of fiction helps younger generations navigate real-world crises, bridging personal identity with broader cultural and political critique.

Recent decades have seen “dark academia” and dystopian novels surge in popularity among younger readers, reflecting enduring 19th-century themes in new guises. Critics note that works like Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) capture the anxieties of late millennials and Gen Z, making “being young a drama of universal significance” (theguardian.com). This is echoed in book clubs and social media: for example, *The Secret History* went viral on TikTok, appealing to young readers with its nihilistic, Gothic vibes



(prospectmagazine.co.uk). Authors explicitly invoke 19th-century legacies – Rooney has even been dubbed “Jane Austen of the precariat” to underscore her focus on class (theguardian.com). The following sections examine how contemporary novels (The Secret History, The Midnight Library, Babel, Normal People, The Hunger Games) revisit themes of political critique, existential dread, feminism and class, acting as “reflective tools” for youth (prospectmagazine.co.uk theguardian.com). Both scholarly commentary and media reviews emphasize how these 21st-century works echo earlier literature (without direct era comparison) and speak to today’s global challenges.

Political Critique and Dystopian Rebellion:

Many modern novels dramatize resistance to oppressive systems, resonating with young readers’ mistrust of authority. Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008) is frequently cited as a right-of-center blockbuster with a powerful subtext: it depicts Katniss Everdeen, a resourceful teenager, leading a revolt in a dystopian, class-divided society. As *The Guardian* notes, it was “always an unlikely franchise: the story of a feminist hero trapped in a dystopian capitalist nightmare” whose message of rebellion “has gone round the world”. In *Panem*, the grim, impoverished districts work under the thumb of an opulent Capitol; class division and propaganda fuel the regime’s tyranny theguardian.com. Collins explicitly links decadence with gender: the Capitol’s “decadent” style is coded as flamboyantly feminine (bright colors, ornamentation), whereas Katniss rejects traditional femininity in order to survive and protect her family. Reviewers observe that Katniss becomes a hero precisely because she steps into her (dead) father’s traditionally masculine role as hunter/provider theguardian.com, subverting patriarchal expectations. This portrayal of a strong female lead who spurns elitist “decadence” made *Hunger Games* a feminist icon for many young readers.

Likewise, Rebecca Kuang’s *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence* (2022) uses fantasy to critique imperialism and social injustice. Set in 1830s Oxford, *Babel* imagines “silver-working” translation magic as the engine of British colonial power theguardian.com. Robin and his friends, marginalized by race and class, realize their scholarly work is weaponized to exploit their homelands. The novel explicitly debates revolution: characters argue whether only violent shock can force change in a system ruled by capitalistic violence feministbookclub.com. Critics note that *Babel* “carefully considers the role of violence” in oppression, ultimately suggesting that the elite use force to maintain the status quo while the powerless feel driven to drastic acts feministbookclub.com. One reviewer argues *Babel* offers vindication to marginalized readers: learning about the brutality of empire through fiction can be “enraging” but also validating for those communities feministbookclub.com. In both *Hunger Games* and *Babel*, young audiences see reflections of their own social critiques – distrust of plutocracy and sympathy for uprising – channeled through thrilling narratives of rebellion.

Existential Dread and the Search for Meaning:

Generational anxiety – over identity, choice and purpose – finds vivid expression in contemporary fiction. Matt Haig’s *The Midnight Library* (2020) overtly grapples with life’s big questions. *The Guardian* review observes that the novel “has the air of a skilful exercise designed to confront depression and anxiety” theguardian.com. Protagonist Nora Seed, facing suicide, discovers a supernatural library containing volumes of lives she could have led. Each book explores an alternate existence based on a different choice, prompting questions like “What’s the best that could happen in your life, and what’s the worst?” theguardian.com. By literally putting her protagonist in endless possible worlds, Haig dramatizes the paralyzing “what if?” anxieties common to young people today, and ultimately celebrates the ordinary value of the life Nora



returns to. This focus on mental health – anxiety, regret, and the search for meaning – has made The Midnight Library a touchstone for many Gen Z readers coping with uncertainty and depression.

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* also embodies existential motifs, albeit wrapped in a thriller. Its dark academia aesthetic appeals to moody youth, and commentators note a thread of nihilism in the novel's philosophy. A Prospect magazine piece on the book's TikTok revival points out parallels between Tartt's work and today's "ongoing vibe shift towards aesthetic, financial and ethical anarchy," remarking that there is "nihilism at the centre of *The Secret History*" prospectmagazine.co.uk. Indeed, the characters' quest for beauty leads them into tragedy – echoing late-19th-century decadent themes – and readers sense an undercurrent of dread about modern life. As one critic observes, *The Secret History* was "written at the apex of neoliberalism, an age preoccupied by a sense of disintegrating social ties" newstatesman.com. In both Tartt's and Haig's novels, generation-defining uncertainties (about community, legacy, and self-worth) surface as existential struggle.

Critics note Haig's novel directly "confronts depression and anxiety," asking what it means to find purpose amid countless possibilities theguardian.com.

Feminism and Gender Dynamics:

Contemporary fiction for young adults frequently foregrounds female agency and critiques of patriarchy. In *Normal People*, Sally Rooney weaves a love story that doubles as social commentary on gender and power. Critics point out that in Marianne and Connell's intimacies "big things" are at play: "social class, money, gender, [and] power" all shape their relationship theguardian.com. Marianne Enders experiences abuse and condescension at home and in college; her journey reveals how easily a young woman's identity can be subsumed by male-driven dynamics. For example, she is assaulted in school and initially blames herself until Connell intervenes – illustrating the shame and silence that patriarchy can impose. Rooney's nuanced portrayal has been described as a kind of "non-feminist feminist" story thebatt.com: on one hand showing Marianne's empowerment when she asserts herself, but on the other depicting how external forces strip away her confidence.

In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen is explicitly cast as a feminist hero. Critics note that the Capitol's style vilifies traditional femininity – in opposition to Katniss's down-to-earth, tomboyish demeanor theguardian.com. As one piece argues, Katniss "rejects the traditional roles of femininity" by becoming a hunter and protector, effectively taking on parental roles for her family theguardian.com. Her strength lies in compassion and rebellion, not in romantic subplots. This portrayal gave the franchise a potent feminist message for viewers and readers: in a brutal world, Katniss redefines what it means to be female by her sheer competence and moral courage. In sum, novels like *Normal People* and *The Hunger Games* use their female protagonists to explore feminism: Marianne and Katniss each challenge restrictive gender norms, encouraging young audiences to question power and agency in society.

Socioeconomic Critique:

Issues of class and economic struggle prominently shape these novels, mirroring the precarious reality many young people face. Rooney's *Normal People* literally pits wealth against poverty: Connell's mother works as Marianne's house cleaner, and in school he is the popular athlete while Marianne is a shy bookworm theguardian.com. At university their social positions invert, underscoring how class influences power even in romantic relationships. Rooney's acute class consciousness earned the novel comparisons to Austen; critics agree it "weave[s] through immiscible layers of class" as a core theme thebatt.com theguardian.com. In the millennial lens,



Connell and Marianne's story becomes a study of the 'precariat' – young people who fluctuate between the educated professional class and economic uncertainty.

The Hunger Games likewise dramatizes class war on a grand scale. The Capitol's extravagance (colorful costumes, feasts, technology) is built upon the starvation and oppression of the outer districts [theguardian.com](#). Katniss's revolt is not just against tyranny but against the brutal inequity that fuels the regime. Even Babel touches on class: Oxford's privileged scholars (white, male) exploit those from colonized regions. The protagonists – a small group of Chinese and other students – find at Babel a rare refuge in academia, but eventually see that their "knowledge is being used to exploit their motherlands" under imperial capitalism [theguardian.com](#). As one reviewer puts it, learning about this history "enrages" the characters and readers alike, vindicating long-held anger about colonialism [feministbookclub.com](#). In these stories, young readers see explicit critiques of neoliberal economics and entrenched hierarchy: the wealthy elite versus the struggling majority, a dichotomy straight from 19th-century socialist novels, replayed for the 21st century.

Global Parallels: European Literary Responses:

These trends in English-language fiction have clear parallels in Europe, where writers historically and today use literature to confront authoritarianism, social upheaval and existential crisis. For example, German educators routinely teach the YA novel *The Wave* (*Die Welle*, 1981) to warn students how easily charismatic authority breeds fascism. As one report describes, *The Wave* – about a teacher's classroom experiment gone awry – illustrates that "human beings are capable of falling under the spell of a dangerous leader" and that this danger is not unique to Nazi Germany [time.com](#). This reflects a larger European tradition: classics like Orwell's *1984* or Zamyatin's *We* (Russia) were written to critique totalitarianism in their time and continue to be read when extremist politics rise.

Feminism has long been a theme in European literature too. Contemporary European authors (from France's Virginie Despentes to Scandinavia's Sofi Oksanen) explore issues like sexual violence, workplace inequality and political representation. Many young Europeans resonate with dystopian and feminist speculative fiction as warnings – for instance, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (although North American) has a strong European readership, and recent reissues of lesser-known works about female dystopia (e.g. *I Who Have Never Known Men*) find new audiences.

Finally, nihilism and existential dread among youth are global phenomena with roots in European thought. Scholars note that today's young adults face "rising costs, stratospheric rents and stagnant wages" and live in fear of climate collapse and persistent injustice [huckmag.com](#). Such pressures have driven many toward pessimism: the philosophy of Nietzsche – who warned in 1884 that "God is dead" and Europeans would face nihilism – feels uncannily realized in conversations about climate fatalism and economic despair [huckmag.com](#). Surveys show record numbers of Western youth overwhelmed by anxiety, echoing those 19th-century concerns. In literature, then, young readers encounter the same questions artists have posed for over a century: Why are we here? And Is there meaning or justice? – be it via Baudelairean poetry, existential novels, or today's bestsellers.

By reviving these themes, 21st-century novels provide a cultural toolkit for Gen Z and late millennials to process modern crises. As one commentator put it, it's "wonderful to see my generation preserved in literature as something worth writing about" [theguardian.com](#) – with authors using fiction to reflect on politics, purpose, and identity. Across the Atlantic and in Europe, stories from *The Secret History* to *The Hunger Games* show that late-19th-century literary



concerns (nihilism, critique of power, gender politics) have merely shifted forms, resurfacing in narratives that speak powerfully to today's youth.

Mainstream Intellectual Literary Fiction:

Literary bestsellers that engage with weighty ideas—what we might call mainstream intellectual literature—have risen to prominence, blending accessibility with depth. Novels like Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*, Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* tackle philosophical, psychological, and social themes while reaching wide audiences. *The Midnight Library*, for example, centers on a protagonist grappling with depression, and in one review the novel is noted as presenting “a unique, albeit slightly controversial, view on mental illness” within a bestselling narrative nashuproar.org. Rooney's *Normal People* similarly sparked generational identification, making “being young a drama of universal significance” in the eyes of many Millennial readers theguardian.com. Tartt's *The Secret History* literally weaves aesthetic philosophy into its plot – the Classics professor in the novel teaches “Classics, ethics, and aesthetic philosophy” to his students, influencing them to commit a Dionysian murder en.wikipedia.org. These examples show how contemporary bestsellers have taken on existential dread, morality, and mental health in ways that enter the cultural mainstream.

Intellect and Identity:

These novels do more than entertain; their characters and ideas become touchstones for identity, especially among Millennials and Gen Z in the digital age. Readers often see themselves reflected in protagonists like Marianne and Connell (*Normal People*), with one critic noting that Rooney's portrayal of her generation “rings entirely true” and that it's “wonderful to see my generation preserved in literature as something worth writing about” theguardian.com. In this way, mainstream intellectual fiction helps shape personal and collective identity. Young adults build communities around these books, discussing them in book clubs or online forums, and even forming part of how they self-identify as “readers.” Surveys find that younger readers' identities as readers are “buttressed by involvement in book clubs, engagement with social media communities such as BookTok and Bookstagram, and access to libraries and bookstores” minnpost.com. Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, a bestselling debut, likewise grapples with race and family in a way that has resonated widely: it is praised as “a powerhouse of a debut novel” about “racial barriers, the burden of familial expectations, and the basic human thirst for belonging” celesteng.com. TikTok and Instagram discussions of these novels turn reading into a shared experience, effectively making literary ideas part of youth culture and personal identity.

Philosophy for the Masses:

Some modern bestsellers explicitly transport philosophical and existential questions into mass culture. Haruki Murakami's novels (for example, *Norwegian Wood* or *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*) are known for their surreal premises and meditations on death and loneliness. An Atlantic review observes that Murakami's appeal rests on a “blend of mystery and accessibility,” and that his intricate, dreamlike narratives are “familiar, even exciting” to millions of readers theatlantic.com. In other words, Murakami manages to write about profound issues (identity, existential choice, the nature of reality) while still drawing an enormous audience. Similarly, Donna Tartt's works like *The Goldfinch* (Pulitzer Prize winner, 2013) combine literary ambition with page-turning plots. These novels handle themes such as art's meaning, loss, and the search for purpose in life, and yet they spent months on bestseller lists. Such success suggests that a book can be both intellectually ambitious and broadly appealing. In this vein, stories once confined to academia (e.g. *The Secret History*'s engagement with classical thought) or to niche



literary circles have become dinner-table conversation, bridging “high” ideas and popular attention.

The Aesthetic of Intellect:

Modern literary hits often fuse rigorous literary style with broad appeal. Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*, despite its uncompromising exploration of trauma and suffering, became “a bona fide cult classic,” selling over a million copies theguardian.com. Its popularity was amplified on social media (with TikTok searches reaching over 200 million views for its title theguardian.com), showing that even a 720-page novel of intense introspection can enter pop culture. Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You* (another bestseller) similarly combines “shimmering prose and precise, painful observation” with an engaging family mystery. Critics laud it as gripping readers with its blend of literary craft and emotional immediacy celesteng.com. In both cases, the aesthetic is cerebral yet accessible: these novels handle mental health, identity, and social issues in rich detail, but they do so in narratives that mainstream audiences find compelling. The result is an “aesthetic of intellect” in which high literary form meets popular narrative – readers get stylistic innovation and thematic depth, without feeling shut out. Across book clubs and courses, these works provoke conversation about trauma, social status, morality, and belonging, demonstrating how deeply their themes penetrate everyday discourse.

Critics debate whether this accessibility compromises rigor or enhances public engagement with ideas. Some reviewers lament that mass-market novels can simplify complex topics. For instance, one literary commentator argued that *The Midnight Library*’s approach to life and death, while ambitious, ultimately feels “dumbed down” into cliché motivational quotes medium.com. Similarly, skeptics worry that tagging Rooney as “the first great millennial novelist” risks reducing her work to generational clichés rather than acknowledging its craft lithub.com. On the other hand, supporters contend that widespread popularity democratizes literature. Platforms like BookTok exemplify this trend: they provide a “democratic” means for authors (even indie writers and marginalized voices) to reach wide audiences, sometimes creating unexpected bestsellers thequeenzone.com. In book clubs and online communities, readers of all backgrounds discuss *Normal People*, *A Little Life*, and similar novels, bringing literary criticism into everyday conversation. Thus, while some argue that pop-literary success might water down nuance, others celebrate it as broadening the conversation—introducing existential and social questions to readers who might not otherwise seek them out minnpost.com thequeenzone.com.

Overall, these mainstream intellectual bestsellers have shown that literary fiction can be both thought-provoking and widely embraced. By repeatedly addressing themes like mental health, identity, morality, trauma, and social awareness, they have not only reflected but actively influenced public discourse. From traditional book clubs to TikTok trends and academic syllabi, these novels invite readers into complex worlds of ideas, making literature a common language for discussing the big questions of our time.

Conclusion:

As demonstrated throughout this paper, contemporary literary fiction plays a vital role in shaping how young readers understand themselves and the world. Novels like *The Hunger Games*, *Babel*, *Normal People*, and *The Secret History* engage with age-old literary concerns—rebellion, morality, trauma, gender, and existentialism—while resonating with the unique pressures of modern life. The rise of mainstream intellectual literature has not only democratized access to complex themes but has also created new arenas for cultural dialogue, from academic seminars to TikTok videos. While some critics argue that accessibility risks simplifying intellectual depth, this paper contends that such literature broadens engagement, making critical thought more inclusive



and impactful. In an age defined by instability and disillusionment, these works offer not just escape but tools for reflection, identity formation, and social critique. Literature today continues to act not merely as a mirror but as a catalyst—helping new generations ask, and perhaps answer, the biggest questions of their time.

Sources: Academic and media analyses of contemporary novels prospectmagazine.co.uk theguardian.com feministbookclub.com feministbookclub.com theguardian.com theguardian.com, theguardian.com, theguardian.com, time.comhuckmag.com, huckmag.com.

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