

Prison Reading Groups (PRG) was created in 1999 to set up, support and fund informal reading groups in prisons. We now support more than 60 groups in over 45 prisons nationwide. PRG is part of Give a Book.



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## Utopia & Dystopia

A regular column to help you find a good read.

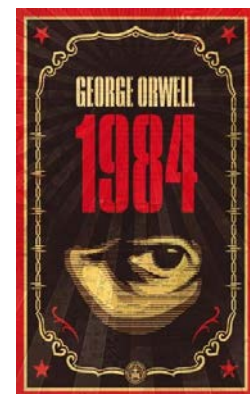
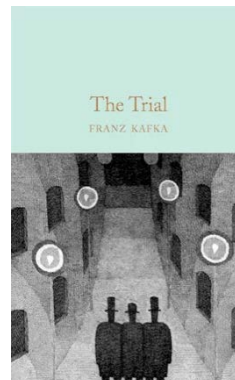
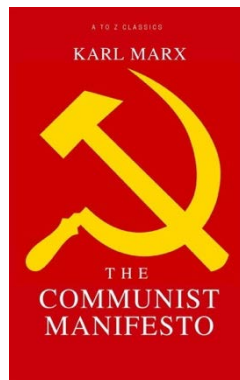
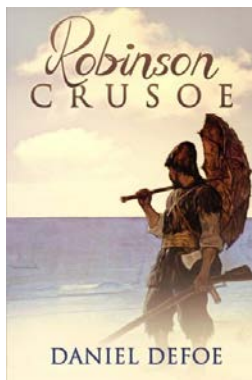
New Year is a time for taking stock and thinking about how we can improve ourselves and our world. So maybe it's also a good time to read or re-read books that explore what that might look like and how it can go wrong. The word 'utopia' has come to mean a perfect place but its Greek roots translate as 'no place'. And some of the most interesting books in the *genre* explore how plans for utopia can easily slide into its opposite.

### Classics

The word 'utopia' was coined by Thomas More for his 1516 book about an imagined island society in the New World. As world-wide exploration grew, early novelists began more and more to imagine what other places might be like through travel books like Daniel Defoe's **The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe** (1719), Jonathan Swift's **Gulliver's Travels** (1726) and Voltaire's **Candide** (1762).

Philosophers and political theorists also speculated about ways to transform society. Karl Marx's **Communist Manifesto** (1848) is an analysis of the evils of capitalism and a project to replace them with a communist utopia.

But other writers explore the possibility that human life is essentially a meaningless nightmare that cannot be understood or changed. In Franz Kafka's **The Trial** (1925) Josef K and the reader are drawn in to a world where nothing makes sense and everything becomes terrifying.



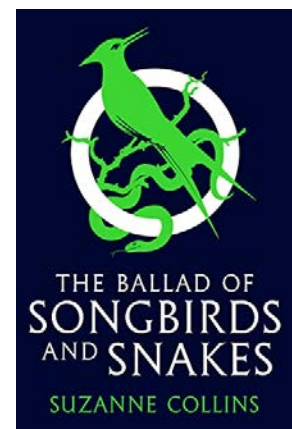
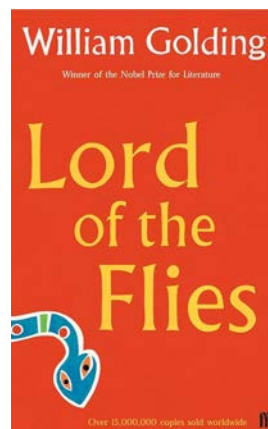
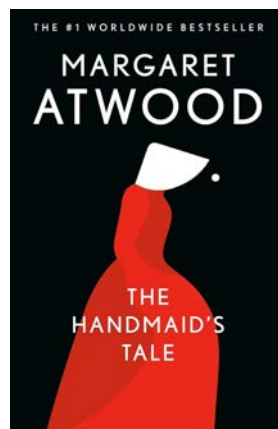
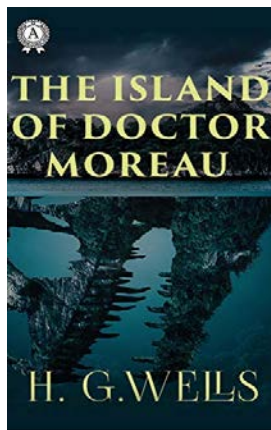
Almost everyone has heard of George Orwell's nightmare dystopia **1984** (1949). Less well-known but worth a read is Aldous Huxley's **Brave New World** (1932). In contrast to Orwell's vision of totalitarian terror, Huxley imagines a world in which people get what they think they want: a popular and legal drug that seems to combine the pleasures of valium and ecstasy; a multi-sensory cinema system called 'the feelies' that serves up multi-sensory pornographic films which viewers can watch while they chew viagra gum. But the result is no less nightmarish. As one critic put it:

*"In 1984 people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us."*

The uninhabited island can be either paradise or hell, as explored in films like *The Beach* and *Fantasy Island*. Books to look out for include H G Wells' **The Island of Dr Moreau** (1896) where the island becomes a laboratory for experiments to create hybrid human-animals through excruciating vivisection. In **Lord of the Flies** (1954) William Golding turns upside down ideas of the utopian island and the innocence of children to present a vision of lawless savagery.

Power relations between men and women are a theme in many dystopian novels including Margaret Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale** and more recently Naomi Alderman's **The Power**, in which women develop the ability to release electrical charges from their fingers which turns them into the dominant sex. John Marrs' **The Marriage Act** imagines a near-future Britain in which the Government passes a law to make marriage more or less compulsory. As the blurb outlines it:

*"Four couples are about to discover just how impossible relationships can be when the government is monitoring every aspect of our personal lives--monitoring every word, every minor disagreement...and will use every tool in its arsenal to ensure everyone will love, honour and obey."*



Novels that explore post-apocalyptic worlds are a popular dystopian sub-genre. Well-known ones include J G Ballard's **The Drowned World** (1962), Cormac McCarthy's **The Road**, (2006), and Jim Crace's **The Pesthouse** (2007).

And for a great dystopian series, there's always Suzanne Collins' **Hunger Games** quartet, including the most recent one, **The Ballad of Songbird and Snakes** (2020) which is a prequel to the other three and set more than 60 years earlier.

Note: your library may not have all of these titles or even any of them, but it's sure to have some of the authors mentioned. So if you like the sound of any of the books mentioned, just include 'or any other books by ...' on your request app.

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