Children's Books

In This Dystopia, Teens Must Choose Wisely

By SUSAN DOMINUS

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Imagine the publishing world as it might look in a dystopian universe in the distant future. In this world, college English majors — call them “Englies” — aspire to write only one kind of book: the dystopian young adult novel set in the distant future. (Englies of a certain status are permitted to write about dystopias populated by vampires.) Another subset of the population — “the Fans” — provides a kind of slave labor, posting endlessly to dedicated blogs and recording podcasts, providing free marketing for an unceasing succession of aspiring best-seller trilogies.

DIVERGENT

By Veronica Roth

487 pp. Katherine Tegen Books/HarperCollins Publishers. $17.99. (Young adult; ages 14 and up)

Excerpt: ‘Divergent’ (harpercollins.com)

I couldn’t help imagining this world as I read “Divergent,” the first in a planned trilogy of young adult novels set in a dystopian future and written by Veronica Roth, who sold the book in a major pre-­emptive bid before she even graduated from Northwestern last year. With “Divergent,” Roth adds to a genre that has crossed over from having a vague cultural moment to being a full-bore trend, much of it driven by the wild success of Suzanne Collins’s “Hunger Games” trilogy.

“Divergent” holds its own in the genre, with brisk pacing, lavish flights of imagination and writing that occasionally startles with fine detail. As the mother of Beatrice, the main character, cuts her daughter’s hair, the young narrator notices “the strands fall on the floor in a dull, blond ring.” Beatrice sees her reflection only when her hair is cut — the second day of every third month — because she has been born into Abnegation, one of five factions that make up the population. Those who belong to Abnegation believe selflessness begets world harmony; those who choose Candor see honesty as the path to the same goal.

The other groups are Amity, Erudite and Dauntless, and it is this last group that calls out to Beatrice when she is given the opportunity either to stay with her family’s group or to choose another allegiance. As part of the initiation process for Dauntless, Tris (a nickname Beatrice adopts to reflect her new self) must prove her mettle with adolescent feats of bravado, like jumping off a moving train onto a rooftop. She endures simulated death traps and jacks up her adrenaline with breathtaking leaps into the unknown.

“Divergent” clearly has thrills, but it also movingly explores a more common adolescent anxiety — the painful realization that coming into one’s own sometimes means leaving family behind, both ideologically and physically. It is not a coincidence that Tris falls in love while undergoing initiation into her new tribe. It is precisely the moment when young people discover romance that family life all but evaporates, at least in terms of its emotional significance.

Terrible things happen to the people Tris loves, yet the characters absorb these events with disquieting ease. Here, somehow, the novel’s flights from reality distance the reader from the emotional impact that might come in a more affecting realistic (or even fantasy) novel.

In this way, though Roth’s “Divergent” is rich in plot and imaginative details, it suffers by comparison with Collins’s opus. The shortcoming would not be so noticeable were there less blatant overlap between the two. Both “Divergent” and “The Hunger Games” feature appealing, but not conventionally pretty, young women with toughness to spare. Both start out with public sorting rituals that determine the characters’ futures. And both put the narrators in contrived, bloody battles that are in fact competitions witnessed by an audience. Even the language sounds familiar: the Hob is a central geographic point in “The Hunger Games”; in “Divergent,” it’s the Hub in the remnants of what was once the Sears Tower. For a book that explores themes about the right to be individual and the importance of breaking away from the pack, “Divergent” does not exactly distinguish itself.

“Now isn’t the time for debates about ethics,” Tris tells her father at one point, when she feels compelled to hurt someone for the greater good. Billboarding of this sort can interrupt the moment by announcing its own significance: now actually is the time for such a debate. In a novel that takes on the problem of conformity and questions the certainty of narrow-minded ideologues, such circuit-breaking is nonetheless useful, forcing the reader to pause and think in the middle of that dauntless break for the plot’s conclusion.

Susan Dominus is a staff writer at The Times Magazine. A version of this review appeared in print on May 15, 2011, on page BR17 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Choose Wisely.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/books/review/young-adult-books-divergent-by-veronica-roth.html