

Spiritual AF Sundays Podcast

Episode 9

The Utopian Dream Shattered Examining Post-Apocalyptic and Dystopian Fiction's Appeal

Transcript

Hey everyone. I'm going to start this episode by sharing a little bit about what is going on in my life right now. I'm in the process of replacing my gaming computer. The one I have is about five years old, so it's not able to run many of the games that are coming out right now. I'm going to admit I spent \$60 on pre-ordering a game that is releasing very soon. This game has early popularity due to the franchise it's in and some news regarding that.

Which game am I talking about? I'm talking about The Last of Us, released for the PC, which is coming up in March. So, focusing more on post-apocalyptic zombie stuff. In addition to that, I just got a subscription to Hulu to watch Handmaid's Tale, which I have yet to see an episode of that.

Both of these actions have led me to think about the type of media I'm consuming and the type of stuff that is considered popular nowadays. Here we are three years after the start of the pandemic, it's not over yet, and we are still fascinated with the post-apocalyptic and the dystopian genres. What does that say about us?

In this episode of Spiritual AF Sundays, we'll discuss the two genres: post-apocalyptic and dystopia. What do they entail, and how are they still popular nowadays, number-wise, other than also philosophy-wise? What does that say about our culture in the here and now?

It's time for you to grab your favorite beverage, sit in your favorite chair, and get ready for this episode of spiritual AF Sundays. The Dystopian Dream Shattered, Examining Post-apocalyptic and Dystopian Fictions Appeal.

[Opening Credits]

And welcome back. My name is Jessica. I'm also known as The Mystic Geek, and today we're going to be talking about our relationship with the media we engage with.

When I talk about relationships, I don't see our engagement with media or with various things as consuming or consumer/consuming. We are relating to it. We are connecting with it. We have various thoughts and feelings that come up from it. It involves us having conversations about it.

So it's not just simply consumption. It is our connection to it. How it impacts us, and then how we've, through our fandom, impacted that genre.

And when I say fandom, it's not just the chitter-chatter. It's also where we throw our dollars. With that, I wanted to focus on two genres here: post-apocalyptic fiction and dystopic or dystopia fiction.

We're going to start off by explaining terms. I want to make sure we are on the same page so that when I discuss things, you are coming at it from my perspective, or at least you have a better understanding of my perspective so that we can have a conversation about it if we ever get to that point. I'm going to talk about speculative fiction, dystopia, and the post-apocalyptic genre. After that, we're going to also talk about some statistics. When I say something is popular, what do I mean by that? So I'm going to share some of the things I found regarding game sales, as well as viewership on shows, movies, or games of this genre. And then, finally, we're going to wrap this up by talking about what it means that we are still fascinated by these genres. What does it mean about our society, especially now that we're three years in on this pandemic? Especially since we have all these world issues that are going on around us, all these fears and concerns. What does it mean that we still engage with this rather than run away because some things are starting to get too real?

So with that, let's begin.

Speculative, Dystopian, and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

The inherent nature of fiction in media, whether we are talking about books, video games, movies, or what have you, is fiction is make-believe. It is not reality. We can all agree on that bit.

Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction is a subset of fiction, and the idea there is it's close enough, but not quite. What speculative fiction does is it takes things from where we're at right now, and it says, well, what could it be in the future? Speculative fiction is things regarding themes or ideas, or events that are not in recorded history, nor are they part of the present universe. And another aspect of it is it is futuristic. There is that subset of fiction that I consider to be more re-imagining or reconstructing, like Abe Lincoln: Zombie Hunter or something like that. This is a bit different. Let's look at a couple of years out or even further than that. What could that future look like, and add in something that is a little bit different. Add in something that we can go, and we can say, all right, this hits a little too close to home, but there's no chance of this happening because of X, Y, and Z reasons. That is what speculative fiction is about.

Dystopian Fiction

Dystopian fiction is a subset of speculative fiction in that we're looking at potential futures, so that's part of the speculative side, but that future is grim and gritty. And when I say grim in this, I don't necessarily mean the gritty aesthetics, even though that can be part of it. What I'm talking about with grimness is the view when it comes to the state or the government or overarching power structures being in command of people's lives to the point where freedom is gone, and we've gone through some drastic changes in these scenarios that impact us.

For instance, I talked about *The Handmaid's Tale* a couple of moments ago, and that one takes a look at the role of women in society and has where a government regime establishes what the woman's role is. Whether they're a wife, whether they're a servant, whether they're a handmaid, which is essentially a surrogate. So we have that.

A couple of decades ago, I forgot when it was released, there was a movie called *Equilibrium*, starring Christian Bale, where emotions are seen as evil. And thus, society has dictated people are to take these drugs to mute their emotions. And all things considered, artful or beautiful because they evoke emotions are illegal. They're contraband. So it's taking a look at life in that aspect. and what can happen when that system is challenged.

The whole Cyber-Punk genre, where the corporations run everything, is another version of a dystopia.

So then you have *The Hunger Games*, a book trilogy, and a movie trilogy that looks at the use of gladiatorial games to show power for the dominant group. And when I say gladiatorial games, I'm meaning that Pan-Am is broken up into all of these districts, and each district is forced to give up two children, one boy, and one girl, as part of this gladiatorial game that's broadcast. The state forces everyone to treat this like this big celebratory event when it's the government showing we have so much power, we can take your children away and force you to watch as we have them kill each other.

Again, we have all these different things that are out there that are what we consider to be dystopian fiction, meaning it focuses on an oppressive state, oppressive capitalist regime, what have you, controlling people's lives, and framing it from the position of the oppressed and how they respond to what's going on there.

Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

And then we have what's called post-apocalyptic fiction. So that takes a look after a catastrophic event, be it disease, climate change, war, or what have you. The world has changed. It is no longer the way that we've seen it are no longer the way that we're used to it in our industrialized nine-to-five world. How does humanity survive? How does humanity handle that change? And it's looking at it from the perspective of the individual, the survivor. Often, post-apocalyptic

beliefs into dystopian because in those cases where the world has had a drastic change, government or corporations can come in and try to fix things, and the way that they fix things is by trying to put in so much control to try and prevent what's happened in the past from happening in the future. Or, using that control to try and encourage humanity's continued survival while giving up what we consider to be human, what makes us human, what makes us real living beings.

That gives you a better understanding of the terms for speculative fiction, dystopian fiction, and post-apocalyptic fiction as genres.

The Popularity of Dystopian and Post-Apocalyptic Media

With that, I'm going to share with you more about what I discovered while researching some popular shows and games that fall into these topics.

The first one is *The Walking Dead* from AMC. This show has been around for what was it like, 11 or 13 seasons? A lot of seasons. It's been around for a bit. When we looked at how popular it was in 2015 and 2016, right around its sixth season, it had about 18 million viewers for its seasoned finale. And when we talk about viewers, many of these shows have timed releases, where they don't go and put everything into streaming immediately, they have timed releases. They track how many viewers watch the show within the first 24 hours of its release. So that's where they came up with the 18 million viewers for its season six release.

Now we're towards season 11, and what I found when looking it up is season 11 had about 3.1 million viewers on its finale. Now doesn't necessarily mean that the popularity of apocalyptic or zombie fiction has decreased over that timeframe. It could mean that the show is less well-received than before. When you start getting into TV shows or franchises that have longer and longer seasons or that been drawn out season-wise. Sometimes people get tired of the writers, or the plot gets grating, or it's hard to get into it because there's so much lore that's been established. That's out there.

However, when look at the most recent show that's out there, *The Last of Us*, is an HBO adaptation of a video game. It's in season one. We're five episodes in. We have viewership stats up to the fourth episode.

Episode one, which aired a couple of weeks ago, was that 4.7 million viewers. So 4.7 million people watched this within the first day after HBO released it on its streaming platforms.

Then, the second episode, the following week, was 5.7 million. A million more viewers watched it.

Episode three had 6.4 million viewers who watched it within the first day, and episode four, which aired the same day as the Grammy's, had 7.5 million viewers.

So it's been increasing by almost a million every episode. It's going to be nine episodes total, so I'd like to know what the final viewership is for its season finale. It's already one of the more popular shows on HBO at the time of this recording.

So this show, *The Last of Us*, is based on a video game. That was released in 2013, so about 10 years ago. And when it was released in 2013, that video game had 1.3 million units sold, so games sold, in its first week. It was at 3.4 million within three weeks. So it was fairly popular then.

The part two version came out on various consoles on June 19th, 2020, is when it came out. And if you remember, a lot of the lockdowns for the pandemic happened in March. This is three months into the pandemic getting real. From what I found out there, they had four millions units released that weekend.

So when we look at *The Last of Us*, the first game in this was at 3.4 million in three weeks. *The Last of Us II* was at 4 million copies sold, in 2020, in the first weekend. And it ended up being the sixth-highest video game sales in the United States in 2020. So that is a lot. That is a fricking lot for a game that involves post-apocalyptic to be sold in the United States amidst the pandemic, I think *Call of Duty* was the top sales and then *Animal Crossing*. This was coming up against that. It's still pretty impressive.

Amidst all this, in between *The Last of Us I* and *The Last of Us II*, we also had *Death Stranding*, another post-apocalyptic game where humanity is very spread out, and there's Sam Bridges is literally trying to build bridges or connections with other people. That game launched in November 2019 and had various other releases based on platforms. Over the two years post release, so July of 2021, it was at 5 million copies sold. And then we're looking at 2022, it was at 10 million copies sold. And we're having it where this is building up popularity-wise.

And I mentioned *Handmaid's Tale* earlier. It's one of Hulu's more popular franchise series. What have you. It's harder to get into the analytics when it comes to streaming for this series. Because this is one of those where all of the episodes got dropped. So when you have that, you really don't have viewership in the same way because there's no way to track how many watches a specific episode has right after its release. After all, people will binge-watch it, or they'll wait to binge watch it till a little bit later. They go based on viewership hours or viewership minutes. And I want to avoid getting into the weeds on that because now you're just having to look at viewership over time compared to other things; it gets a little messy. However, this is one of their more popular shows. It's won various awards.

So all this is saying around here is for a niche, dystopian fiction, and post-apocalyptic fiction are solid when it comes to its fan base.

Why We're Drawn to Dystopian and Post-Apocalyptic Media

So we've covered what these terms are: speculative fiction, dystopia, and post-apocalyptic. We also talked about the popularity of these niche genres. with video games, with books and with TV shows. Now we're gonna talk about the why's, especially in this day and age.

I'm of the camp that believes we humans are hardwired for negativity. And the word is, and I say that our predecessors, our ancestors, did not have the luxuries that we have, that we take for granted regarding things like food, shelter, and security. So they had a deal with predators. They had to deal with starvation. They had to deal with potential conflicts with other tribes or other groups. So they always had to be on guard. If they had anything good happen. It was temporary. It was strife and issues that they had to deal with. We have not escaped that. So even though in some areas of the world, like for instance, the United States where I'm at, we have it very good compared to others, we're still hard-wired to have those negative thoughts as part of our means of protecting ourselves. What dystopic fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction does is give our brains a space and a setting for those thoughts to ruminate in.

Secondly, we're also wired to compare ourselves to other people. To see how we are doing compared to others. And with that, when we see someone else having it worse than us, we can have an empathetic response, but we're also comparing our situation to theirs. And in doing so, realizing that our situation is okay. That's where these genres of fantasy appeal because we can look at what we're dealing with and realize we're not having it as bad as those people in that imaginary world. So again, it's a way for us to escape our hardships by comparing our hardships with some fantasy hardships that are out there.

Another aspect of this, and I feel that this deals with American exceptionalism and some of our Puritanical beliefs, and that is the belief that greatness needs to have suffered in order for greatness to exist. Or what I should say is that greatness can be born of suffering. It takes hardship. It takes strife for us to see who we are and for us to be tested and to grow. And why I say this thought is based in American Exceptionalism is it hearkens to the American Dream that if you go through, you do your bash, you put your work in, good things will happen to you. You'll have a family and, in every house, a white picket fence. A chicken in every pot. A car in every driveway is the American Dream, but it requires people to go through hardship and sacrifice to get that.

And in this day and age, the American dream is dead. It is not around, at least not in the way that the people who invented this concept believe it is. There are the haves, and there are the have-nots. There's the people who are doing well and those who aren't, the people who are getting the great stuff without having to go through work. There's the people who are hustling it and pushing it and getting those things that they want. And then, there are the people who have all this bad stuff happened to them. They have nothing good to show for it.

This whole greatness from suffering, it oversimplifies things. And, we like simple things. We like straightforward things. So by removing the complexity of the real world, that's another way that it brings appeal.

And then another reason for our attention to it is it gives us an idea of what might be without necessarily having that stuff happened. So, unfortunately, when we're looking at dystopic fiction, especially in the United States, it's hitting a little too close to home. I mean, when we look at CyberPunk, where the companies run everything, we look at the monopolies of companies that are out there right now. It's too close to home. I'm not going to get into the numbers or conjecture. That could be another episode entirely, or I couldn't bring a guest on to talk about that. But if some of these companies went down or they pulled away their resources, we would be in a lurch. What would the United States be like without the internet? What would the world be like without the internet? Or what would the world be like if we had a nuclear apocalypse or things like that.

Our brain starts to wonder, what would life be like in those cases?

One thing that I would like to point out in all this is when we're looking at dystopia when looking at post-apocalyptic fiction: these settings, these genres impact us when we're used to a nine-to-five world. Where we're used to having it, where food shelter, security knows are things that we often take for granted. These types of settings place characters in a fictional world where those things aren't guaranteed, bringing some fascination there.

What I find fascinating is frequently, when we look at things from the point of view of the individual, the core character. They see it as corrupt; they see things as pretty grim. I'm guessing if we were to flip things and look at it from the perspective of those in power, they're thinking that they're doing this for the greater good of humanity.

For instance, if we look at *The Last of Us*, the series that I mentioned at the beginning, I'm guessing that the people who are on top aren't looking at the power that they're wielding and getting gratification from it. From their perspective, they are making some hard decisions for the greater good. And they feel that the only way to guarantee humanity's survival is by having this authoritarian regime that will kill people for minor infractions because they have to keep everyone in line for survival. And that's a dark way of looking at humanity. And it's tough to look at there.

I'm going to riff on this one. Part of the reason why we're seeing this rise of popularity or this continued popularity in post-apocalyptic and dystopian fiction is because of current events that are going on right now. Especially when we look at the pandemic, which started, it's not done, it started in March of 2020 when it built into public awareness.

Then, we were figuring out how to deal with what is essentially a apocalypse scenario. A pandemic that killed millions of people, I would say, is a valid apocalypse scenario. And we examine how the world responded to it.

In a lot of those cases, the government came in and shut everything down. Shut everything except for non essential services, restricted travel, those sorts of things. And, what I find fascinating in all of this is that those who are anti-authoritarian, or those who rally for the individual in these fictional settings, in the post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction settings, I would say they pretend to be a little bit more on the liberal end of the spectrum there. At the same time, these are also the groups of people that, when the pandemic started to really take, the hold of the world, were pro-authoritarian in that case. So we're looking at. saying yes to lockdowns, no to unnecessary travel or non-essential things out there masking, and requiring people to take on a shared behavior that they may or may not have been comfortable with.

So it's interesting to see the interplay between what we're okay with within a real-life scenario versus what we're not okay with in a fictional scenario. Now you could argue while people were asking for masking or demanding lockdowns where people did not go to Home Depot during the middle of the pandemic while at the same time saying we need to have access to food and whatnot. A lot of these times, when we have these dystopic fictions, or these post-apocalyptic fictions, we're looking at it from when things have established themselves versus those initial moments. And I'm wondering what those initial moments would have been like in those stories right when everything was happening or transitioning. And seeing those small steps that led to those final bits.

So with that, I think that is the crux of why these genres are so popular now, and they're staying popular, is because we are at a point where we could potentially be seeing those initial moments before we hit a full dystopia; before we hit a full apocalypse, and we want to take cues from that from fiction to understand what is it that we're doing now that could lead to that? And how can we prevent us from hitting that trajectory?

Call for Listener Feedback

So I hope that this all made sense. It was more me through and just doing the stream of thought rambling on these ideas here. It was either that or talked about that other video game that's come out and the spiritual implications of people's beliefs around that. But I decided not to go that route. , I decided to focus more on zombies versus a Wizarding video game that just recently came out.

Anyways, do you have some thoughts on this one? Here's how you can get a hold of me. If you want to, feedback is always appreciated here. You can always ask questions or provide feedback by email; at jess@themysticgeek.com. Otherwise, you can also reach out to me at

speakpipe.com/themysticgeek to share feedback by voice. In case you want to do it that way instead of by email.

Upcoming Episodes

So what is coming up over the next few weeks?

This coming Sunday, which is February 19th, is episode number 10. Woohoo, we're hitting that milestone! And for that, we'll bring on Kathleen Donnelley Israel to talk about her pilgrimage on the Camino Santiago. So we'll be sharing what the heck the Camino Santiago is, and her experience with that pilgrimage in that upcoming episode.

The following week, which is Sunday, February 26th, episode 11, we're going to bring on. Mark Wendt to talk about spiritual evolution. On that one, he and I had an amazing conversation that was about spiritual evolution, politics, and the mish-mashing of various things. So you'll find a lot of wisdom and some fun in that as well.

We are wrapping up episode nine of Spiritual AF Sundays.

If you're a dystopia or zombie fan like me, I hope that you have fun watching the most recent episodes of The Last of Us or whatever shows or games that you play. So with that, have a great week, and hope your time is spiritual AF.

[Closing Credits]