

## YA FICTION: 11 CYBERPUNK NOVELS YOU NEED TO READ

Never heard of cyberpunk? It's a subgenre of science fiction, a blending of "high tech" and "low life". Although it's not hot right now, cyberpunk and dystopias have a lot in common (think *The Hunger Games*, or *Kaimira: Sky Village*). But where dystopias are more general (what if the government took control? what if a plague wiped out half the population?), cyberpunk plays with scientific what-ifs within the context of a greater dystopic world. And although not specifically geared toward YA readers, many cyberpunk novels--like Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*--speak to the teen in all of us.

Some of these titles are marketed as straight out YA (marked with a \*); the rest are considered adult lit, but are easily crossover.

### 1. SNOW CRASH, Neal Stephenson

In California of the near future, when the U.S. is only a "Burbclave" (city-state), the Mafia is just another franchise chain (CosaNostrastet Pizza, Incorporated) and there are no laws to speak of, Hiro Protagonist follows clues from the Bible, ancient Sumer and high technology to help thwart an attempt to take control of civilization--such as it is. When he logs on to Metaverse, an imaginary place entered via computer, Hiro encounters Juanita Marquez, a "radical" Catholic and computer whiz. She warns him off Snow Crash (a street drug named for computer failure) and gives him a file labeled Babel (as in Tower of Babel). Another friend, sp ok/pk Da5id, who ignores Juanita's warning, computer crashes out of Metaverse into the real world, where he physically collapses. Hiro, Juanita, Y.T. (a freewheeling, skateboard-riding courier) and sundry other Burbclave and franchise power figures see some action on the way to finding out who is behind this bizarre "drug" with ancient roots. Although Stephenson ( *Zodiac* ) provides more Sumerian culture than the story strictly needs (alternating intense activity with scholarship breaks), his imaginative juxtaposition of ancient and futuristic detail could make this a cult favorite.--*PW*

### 2. HALTING STATE, Charles Stross

Starred Review. This brilliantly conceived techno-crime thriller spreads a black humor frosting over the grim prospect of the year 2012, when China, India and the European System are struggling for world economic domination in an infowar, and the U.S. faces bankruptcy over its failing infrastructure. Sgt. Sue Smith of Edinburgh's finest, London insurance accountant Elaine

Barnaby and hapless secret-ridden programmer Jack Reed peel back layer after layer of a scheme to siphon vast assets from Hayek Associates, a firm whose tentacles spread into international economies. The theft is routed through Avalon Four, a virtual reality world complete with supposedly robbery-proof banks. As an electronic intelligence agency trains innocent gamers to do its dirty work, Elaine sets Jack to catch the poacher. Hugo-winner Stross (Glasshouse) creates a deeply immersive story, writing all three perspectives in the authoritative second-person style of video game instructions and gleefully spiking the intrigue with virtual Orcs, dragons and swordplay. The effortless transformation of today's technological frustrations into tomorrow's nightmare realities is all too real for comfort.--*PW*

### 3. NEUROMANCER, William Gibson

Here is the novel that started it all, launching the cyberpunk generation, and the first novel to win the holy trinity of science fiction: [the Hugo Award](#), [the Nebula Award](#) and the Philip K. Dick Award. With *Neuromancer*, William Gibson introduced the world to cyberspace--and science fiction has never been the same. Case was the hottest computer cowboy cruising the information superhighway--jacking his consciousness into cyberspace, soaring through tactile lattices of data and logic, rustling encoded secrets for anyone with the money to buy his skills. Then he double-crossed the wrong people, who caught up with him in a big way--and burned the talent out of his brain, micron by micron. Banished from cyberspace, trapped in the meat of his physical body, Case courted death in the high-tech underworld. Until a shadowy conspiracy offered him a second chance--and a cure--for a price.... --*Amazon*

### 4. DIASPORA, Greg Egan

By the year 2975, humanity has wandered down several widely divergent evolutionary paths. "Flesher" life is that which resides in a basically human body, though genetically engineered mutations have created communication problems throughout the species. In the "polises," meanwhile, disembodied but self-aware artificial intelligences procreate, interact, make art and attempt to solve life's mathematical mysteries. Then there are the "gleisners," which are conscious, flesher-shaped robots run by self-aware software that is linked directly to the physical world through hardware. Throughout, Egan (*Distress*) follows the progress of Yatima, an orphan spontaneously generated by the non-sentient software of the Konishi polis. Yatima gains self-awareness, meets with Earthly fleshers and, when tragedy strikes, becomes personally involved in the greatest search for species survival ever undertaken. Though the novel often reads like a series of tenuously connected graduate theses and lacks the robust drama and characterizations of

good fiction, fans of hard SF that incorporates higher mathematics and provocative hypotheses about future evolution are sure to be fascinated by Egan's speculations.--*PW*

#### 5. THE SOFTWARE SERIES, PJ Haarsma \*

Johnny Turnbull has spent all of his 12 years aboard the seed-ship Renaissance en route to the Rings of Orbis. Due to a mechanical problem, the adults on the spaceship perished long before Johnny and the other young passengers were born (they were stored as embryos and raised by the ship's computer). When they arrive on Orbis 1, the orphans quickly learn that they will be forced to work for the Guarantors (alien businessmen) in order to pay off their dead parents' debt for their passage. Johnny is immediately identified as the first human software, someone with the ability to enter and manipulate a computer with his mind. Because of his gift, he is a prime suspect when the central computer of Orbis 1 begins to malfunction. He must prove his innocence and solve the mystery of the mechanical failures before time runs out. The author deftly introduces the futuristic setting without getting bogged down in long and detailed descriptive passages, and the brisk plot will keep the interest of reluctant readers. Although a few of the secondary characters are not fully developed, Johnny and his sister are well drawn, and the scenes between the two are skillfully crafted. The first in a planned quartet, this book is a good selection for science-fiction fans.--*Melissa Christy Buron, Epps Island Elementary, Houston, TX for School Library Journal*

#### 6. KAIMIRA: THE SKY VILLAGE, Monk Ashland & Nigel Ashland \*

In a future world devastated by the Trinary Wars, human beings battle for supremacy with beasts and intelligent machines called meks. Though they have never met and live half a world apart, 12-year-old Mei and 13-year-old Rom communicate through their respective copies of the fabulous, interactive Tree Book, inhabited (or possessed?) by something calling itself Animus. The kids' body chemistry also contains something odd—the Kaimira Gene, which means that their human genes are intermixed with mek and beast elements. Talk about multiple-personality disorder! The first volume of a planned five-book series, this title is short on characterization and long on plot complications. It's also as much a hybrid as Mei and Rom, part book, part online opportunity; the title contains a mini-packet of appended matter that guides readers to a companion Web site, where they'll find fun and games, including an interactive online community and behind-the-scenes glimpses. Kids will be tantalized, but adults will probably throw up their hands. Move over, Brave New World. --*Michael Cart for Booklist*

## 7. THE DIFFERENCE ENGINE, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling

In a surprising departure from the traditional view of cyberpunk's bleak future, Gibson ( *Mona Lisa Overdrive* ) and Sterling ( *Islands in the Net* ) render with elan and colorful detail a scientifically advanced London, circa 1855, where computers ("Engines") have been developed. Fierce summer heat and pollution have driven out the ruling class, and ensuing anarchy allows the subversive, technology-hating Luddites to surface and battle the intellectual elite. Much of the problem centers on a set of perforated cards, once in the possession of an executed Luddite leader's daughter, later in the hands of "Queen of Engines" Ada Byron (daughter of prime minister Lord Byron), finally given to Edward Mallory, a scientist. Mallory, who knows the cards are a gambling device that can be read with a specialized Engine, is soon threatened and libeled by the Luddites, and he and his associates confront the scoundrels in a violent showdown. A sometimes listless pace and limp conclusions that defy the plot's complexity flaw an otherwise visionary, handsomely written, unsentimental tale that convincingly revises the 19th-century Western world.--*PW*

## 8. KILN PEOPLE, David Brin

Bestselling novelist Brin (*Startide Rising*; *The Postman*; etc.) restricts the action to planet Earth, but still allows his imagination to roam the cosmos in this ambitious SF/mystery hybrid whose grasp occasionally exceeds its reach. Thanks to the new technology of imprinting, people in a near-future America can copy their personalities into animated clay bodies (called "dittos" or "golems"), which last a single day. Albert Morris, private investigator, is his own sidekick as he attempts to uncover the murderer of a prominent imprinting research scientist, capture a criminal mastermind specializing in ditto the major ditto manufacturer and pinning the blame on several Alberts. Brin deftly explores the issues of identity, privacy and work in a world where everyone is supported with a living wage and has ready access to duplication technology. The book features the author's usual style, with a lighter touch and punnish humor abounding amid the hard SF speculation. The duplication of the "ditective" makes for a challenging twist on the standard private eye narrative, allowing Morris to simultaneously lead the reader through three separate (and interacting) plot lines. The hardboiled framework and the humor mix a bit uneasily, as does the social background of a libertarian/socialist U.S.A. The book's major fault lies in the diffusion of most of the tension as expendable dittos replace vulnerable humans for much of the action. Still, the work is brightened by Brin's trademark hardheaded optimism.--*PW*

## 9. SOFTWARE, Rudy Rucker

It was Cobb Anderson who built the "boppers"—the first robots with real brains. Now, in 2020, Cobb is just another aged "pheezer" with a bad heart, drinking and grooving on the old tunes in Florida retirement hell. His "bops" have come a long way, though, rebelling against their subjugation to set up their own society on the moon. And now they're offering creator Cobb immortality but at a stiff price: his body his soul ... and his world. It was Cobb Anderson who built the "boppers"—the first robots with real brains. Now, in 2020, Cobb is just another aged pheezer with a bad heart, drinking and grooving on the old tunes in Florida retirement hell. His "bops" have come a long way, though, rebelling against their subjugation to set up their own society on the moon. And now they're offering creator Cobb immortality, but at a stiff price: his body, his soul. . .and his world.--*Back cover*

#### 10. DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP? Philip K. Dick \*

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was published in 1968. Grim and foreboding, even today it is a masterpiece ahead of its time. By 2021, the World War had killed millions, driving entire species into extinction and sending mankind off-planet. Those who remained coveted any living creature, and for people who couldn't afford one, companies built incredibly realistic simulacra: horses, birds, cats, sheep. . . They even built humans. Emigrants to Mars received androids so sophisticated it was impossible to tell them from true men or women. Fearful of the havoc these artificial humans could wreak, the government banned them from Earth. But when androids didn't want to be identified, they just blended in. Rick Deckard was an officially sanctioned bounty hunter whose job was to find rogue androids, and to retire them. But cornered, androids tended to fight back, with deadly results. --*Paul Williams for Rolling Stone*

#### 11. THE HUNGER GAMES, Suzanne Collins

In a not-too-distant future, the United States of America has collapsed, weakened by drought, fire, famine, and war, to be replaced by Panem, a country divided into the Capitol and 12 districts. Each year, two young representatives from each district are selected by lottery to participate in The Hunger Games. Part entertainment, part brutal intimidation of the subjugated districts, the televised games are broadcasted throughout Panem as the 24 participants are forced to eliminate their competitors, literally, with all citizens required to watch. When 16-year-old Katniss's young sister, Prim, is selected as the mining district's female representative, Katniss volunteers to take her place. She and her male counterpart, Peeta, the son of the town baker who seems to have all the fighting skills of a lump of bread dough, will be pitted against bigger, stronger representatives who have trained for this their whole lives. Collins's characters are

completely realistic and sympathetic as they form alliances and friendships in the face of overwhelming odds; the plot is tense, dramatic, and engrossing. This book will definitely resonate with the generation raised on reality shows like *Survivor* and *American Gladiator*. Book one of a planned trilogy. *Jane Henriksen Baird, Anchorage Public Library, AK for School Library Journal*