

2.2 Contemporary Background

cinema of cinema's own history, in particular embracing its trashier elements, pretty much defined the pop culture of the 1990s.

“Sameness” in the book business

In literature, too, the 1990s were a **time of change**, but in a maybe less healthy manner. The growth of chain bookstores (like *Waterstone's* in the UK and *Barnes & Noble* in the US), which centralised the marketing opportunities for publishers and concentrated potential readers and book buyers in more focussed environments, was one development which **changed the book trade**. But by the end of the 1990s the Internet was here and *Amazon* in particular had changed the rules completely. This commercial focus of retail outlets for books made the available market space for publishers and authors more high-profile – the big chain bookstores were in every city, and could reach a huge potential customer base – but at the same time more limited. The arena for new books was growing smaller, as the big chains tended to promote and sell the same books. Instead of finding 100 books by different, new authors, you would be more likely to find 100 copies of the same book by one hugely popular bestselling writer. **This would be an example of “Sameness” in effect in culture.**

1990s: Literature

Science fiction, which aside from Young Adult fiction is the most relevant genre here, **looks back to the 1950s** as its “Golden Age”. This was the period in which SF historians and purists would argue that the genre had the most energy, produced its most important and innovative writers and works, and made the biggest leaps in its growth as a literary genre and as a unique environment for human creative curiosity. The other crucially important period in SF history is the New Wave of the 1970s which included writers like J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock, and which opened SF up to more modern, socially and culturally aware themes and settings.

Science fiction (SF)

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By the 1990s SF was, in the mainstream, **reduced to spaceships and aliens** again. Even the arguably most successful and important SF movie of the 1990s, *The Matrix* (1999), was an almost Tarantino-style mash-up of ideas borrowed from the works of Philip K. Dick with action scenes inspired by the violent choreography of 1970s kung fu films, all re-packaged in skin-tight PVC outfits and sunglasses indoors, the edgy aesthetic of the day.

The only original thing here was **the combination of elements**, not the created work itself. In SF literature, one of probably the most famous and successful writers of the 90s was Iain M. Banks with his *Culture* series of novels, who had a simultaneous career as a writer of popular literary fiction under the name Iain Banks.

The 1990s saw in SF as well as in most other genres of pop culture media **an increased presence of women** working in fields which had usually been associated with men. While there had always been women writers of science fiction, including some of the most admired and respected writers in the field (notably Octavia Butler 1947–2006 and Ursula LeGuin 1929–2018), and the creator of the genre was a woman (Mary Shelley, with *Frankenstein* in 1818), the genre of science fiction has always been widely viewed as something by and for boys. **During the 1990s this changed dramatically.**

Lois Lowry's venture into science fiction came in the early 1990s: she had never written in the genre before. Her approach to science fiction is not particularly true to the genre, and it is only when she began to expand on the world of *The Giver* with the sequels, years later, that she seems to have concentrated more and put more thought into the structures and systems of her imagined future world.

But her novel arrived at a time when young adults – teenagers – were being increasingly discovered and targeted as customers and readers. So *The Giver* could be **marketed and sold as a children's**

SF: Literature for
the boys

Lowry's *The Giver*

Young Adult
fiction (YA)

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book, or, as they were then becoming known, as YA fiction, rather than as science fiction.

The processes of hybridisation which were changing pop music and mainstream cinema were having a different effect in the world of literature. Books were being marketed in an increasingly sophisticated way, echoing the traditional marketing of pop music for particular audiences (the most important American music charts, for example, have long been subdivided into categories like “rock”, “country” and “R&B”, targeting the different relevant audiences specifically).

The pressure for publishers and booksellers to market new books to existing target audiences has always resulted in a large amount of generic fiction – **books which are written to fulfil existing expectations on the part of the reader**. Many of the YA dystopian fantasies which have appeared since the huge success of Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* (2008–2010) have been little more than attempts to sell as similar a story as possible to the same readers, for example, and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1937–1949) created an entire genre, with literally hundreds of authors in the years since working in exactly the same style and using exactly the same themes and storylines.

Lowry’s *The Giver* is an unusual example of a book which has ancestors – Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is an obvious one – **without being an attempt to reproduce or imitate**, and which has been both critically acclaimed and wildly popular, and yet has not produced imitations. **Its contemporary background is interesting but actually less relevant to the book itself** than is frequently the case, in particular for dystopias or SF, both being genres which by their very nature often tend to reflect on the environment in which they were created. As she explains in her *Newbery Medal* acceptance speech in 1994, the roots of *The Giver* go much further back than

⇒ See Chapter
3.1 Origins and
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the contemporary world in which she wrote it – 1990s America – into her childhood in Japan and through the 1950s and 1970s³. The success of *The Giver* can be attributed in part to increasingly sophisticated marketing processes which allowed it to benefit from the growing exploitation of the YA fiction target audience, but its enduring power and success have to do with the fact that it is a book **rooted in a much deeper past than the USA of the 1990s.**

³ https://www.walden.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Newbery_Award.pdf

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

Lowry has written more than 40 books for children and young adults. She has won and been nominated for many prizes for her work, including the most prestigious awards in the field of children’s literature, including the *Hans Christian Andersen Award* and the *Newbery Medal* (twice). Her most famous, popular and acclaimed books are *The Giver* (1993) and *Number the Stars* (1989).

SUMMARY

Many of her books have been multi-volume series, like *The Giver*, which became a quartet, and the *Anastasia* series for younger readers, with nine books written between 1979 and 1995. She has also written several stand-alones and an autobiography. Her most recent book was *Gooney Bird and all her Charms* (2014), the sixth title in the *Gooney Bird* series for younger readers.

Writer for young people

Lois Lowry has written too many books to present them all in this study guide, but here is **an overview of a few of her most important published titles.**

***The Giver* Quartet**

Lowry says of the “sequel” to *The Giver* that she imagined a world “of the future [...] one that had regressed instead of leaping forward technologically as the world of *The Giver* has”⁴. All of the books are set in the same world, but each one has a different protagonist.

4 *The Giver*, US edition: author interview, p. 6. Or <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/review-giver-tripreading-morgan-1200->