The Evolution of Speculative Fiction

1516 – 'Utopia' by Thomas More

Written during the reign of King Henry VIII, 'Utopia' is a satirical essay that explores a range of social, political, economic and religious ideas. The fictional island of Utopia is a society in which citizens enjoy simple, communal living with no private property. The utopians are peaceful and morally self-governing and there exists no poverty in this society.

1904 – 'Peter Pan' by J M Barrie

First produced in 1904, Peter Pan is a play about a mischievous boy who refuses to grow up. He lives in Neverland where he leads a group of Lost Boys (children who fell out of their prams when their parents were not looking), fights pirates including Captain Hook and interacts with mythical creatures such as mermaids and fairies.

1993 – 'The Giver' by Lois Lowry

In a seemingly utopian society, negative feelings and experiences such as pai and sadness have been eradicated. Social order is achieved through conformity and restricting aspects of humanity such as access to memory and free will.

2008 – 'The Hunger Games' by Suzanne Collins

Published in 2008, but set in an unspecified time in the future, The Hunger Games presents a dystopian world where children are forced to compete in a televised battle to the death as punishment for the rebellion of their ancestors. Collins explores themes such as the ethics of entertainment, inequality and rebellion against authority.
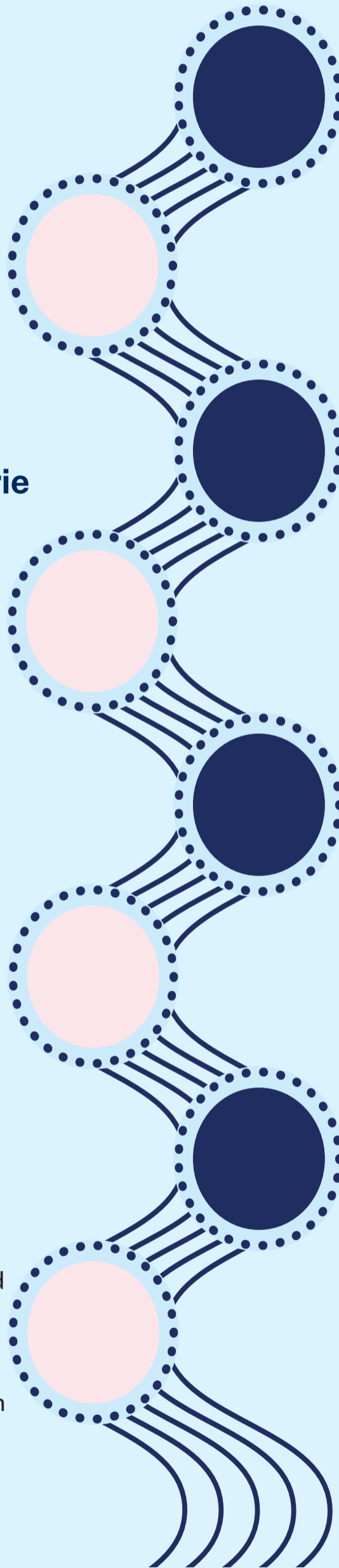
Ancient civilisations – Medieval times

Myths and legends are integral to the cultural identity of a range of of ancient civilisations. Myths are oral stories involving gods and fantastic creatures told to explain natural phenomena such as earthquakes or lightning. Legends are narratives about an historical person or event that may have been embellished. Legends usually reflect cultural values; for example, the legend of Robin Hood represents the fair distribution of wealth.

1818 – 'Frankenstein' by Mary Shelley

Considered one of the first science-fiction novels, 'Frankenstein' tells the story of a scientific genius who creates and brings to life a monster assembled from human body parts. In response to rejection by his creator, the monster takes revenge by turning against the ambitious scientist.

1953 – 'Fahrenheit 451' by Ray Bradbury

'Fahrenheit 451' presents a future society in which books are forbidden and it is the job of 'firemen' to burn books. The novel explores themes of censorship and the demise of the appreciation of literature because of the advent of electronic media.

1982 – 'Bladerunner' by Ridley Scott

Based on the science-fiction novel, 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?' Ridley Scott's 1982 film 'Bladerunner' questions what it means to be human and the ethical implications of artificial intelligence.

2003 – 'Oryx and Crake' by Margaret Atwood

'Oryx and Crake' is set in a post-apocalyptic world where most of humanity has perished as a result of a genetically engineered plague. The novel explores real-world issues such as bioethics, environmental collapse and exploitation of the natural world.