Post-disaster fiction for young adults is a huge genre, perhaps because it foregrounds some of the key elements of young adult fiction: a young adult protagonist trying to find her or his way in the world and learning to ask challenging and life-changing questions in the process; the issue of what kind of adult world the young adult is likely to enter; and the question of whether that world needs to be challenged. Set in the future, Bernard Beckett’s Genesis is an outstanding and original novel which could easily be enjoyed by a range of readers regardless of whether or not they are familiar with the young adult post-disaster genre.

Young protagonist Anaximander is undertaking a five-hour oral examination, which will determine her future: she hopes to be accepted into the elite Academy, and has spent many hours with her tutor, Pericles, in preparation for the exam. Through Anaximander’s answers, we learn that there has been a major international war in the middle of the twenty-first century. There were many contributing factors to the cause of the war: political conflict, climate change, economic growth, which brought its own threat, but Anaximander suggests that the real problem was the fading of the human spirit. In other words, humanity was losing its optimism, its curiosity and its confidence, and was sinking into superstition. This superstition led people to be fearful of one another and to demonise those they considered outsiders.

As the unrest developed, an astute and wealthy businessman named Plato realised what was likely to happen, and created a power base in a group of islands at the bottom of the world known then as Aoteaor. With the increasing tension in the outside world, Plato played on people’s fears and caused the Great Sea Fence of The Republic to be built, which kept Aoteaor apart from the rest of the world. Refugees from the devastated outside ‘world were killed if they tried to come near what was now known as The Republic.

With their homeland apparently secure, the people looked to their saviour, Plato, to guide their future. Plato maintained that the disaster had come about because people had been far too willing to accept change without thinking through its implications, and he argued for a society founded on a very specific type of order. Characteristics of this order included opposition to individualism, and an emphasis on fear of the outsider: People were put into one of four castes, depending on their genomes, and children were either allocated to their caste around their first birthday or destroyed if they showed traits that might threaten The Republic.

Although Anaximander is the protagonist in Genesis, there is a second key young adult character: Adam Forde. The society in which Anaximander lives has some vital differences from The Republic in which Adam was born, but she nevertheless feels a deep affinity with the young rebel who died before her lifetime. Anaximander has chosen Adam as her particular subject for the examination, and through her verbal answers to the Examiners and the holograms she has prepared (and which are played in the examination) we get a picture of the brilliant and unpredictable Adam who somehow managed to escape termination as a child and who went on to challenge The Republic.

Working on the assumption that those at the lowest end of society have the most reason to rebel, The Republic had been trying to develop artificial intelligences which would mean that people would no longer have to do certain tasks—but so far these robots had proved unsafe. When Adam is brought to trial for having helped a young refugee girl, he is sentenced, for various political reasons, to become the full-time companion of an android named Art, whose creator hopes that if Art could spend time with someone other than the person who created him, the android’s capacity for interactive intelligence would become more fully developed.

The exchanges between Adam and Art are brilliant. As the relationship between the two develops, the issue of what differentiates machine from human is explored from several angles, including questions of consciousness, morality, free will, and the nature of thought itself. How we treat those we see as different from ourselves is a key theme in Genesis, and is central to the communication between Adam and Art.

There is a clever twist, at the end of Genesis: a twist that is set up perfectly fairly within the novel but which a reader is unlikely to foresee (and even if the reader does predict it, the ending of the novel will almost certainly not be spoiled, for reasons it would be unfair to divulge here). Genesis would be an terrific book to use with middle-secondary school students (as long as an instance of the “T-word” is not a problem), and is unlikely to go astray with senior students either. It’s perfectly possible to read and enjoy Genesis without knowing the classical or religious references, but it can certainly be rewarding to look them up and see how they are used in the novel. (I found it particularly interesting to look at Book 4 of Plato’s The Republic after reading Genesis.)

However, you don’t have to be a history buff or an SF fan to enjoy Genesis: it is a rich, engaging and easily accessible book that maintains and even deepens its appeal through frequent re-reads, and the questions it raises -- particularly in relation to otherwise and difference -- are crucial to our early twenty-first century world.