

# From Desperation to Discovery: Strategies of Survival in The City of Ember

by

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## Abstract:

Jeanne DuPrau's *The City of Ember* presents, a future society in an apocalyptic setting, where the need to survive in the world of destruction is highlighted. Constructed thousands of feet underground, the people of the Ember city, face many oppressions and troubles. Due to the failing infrastructure and resource shortages, the people of the Ember city face various survival strategies. The story of the novel revolves around the protagonists of the novel, namely, Doon and Lina. Moreover, it analyses the challenges faced by them in navigating the route to a new society away from the underground world. Throughout the novel, their attempt to find a way out of the Ember is emphasised. Being away from the real world, it is really very pathetic for the people of the Ember to lead a life in the underground. Every resident tries to survive by all means. They hope for the builders of Ember to return and rescue them from destruction. Survival in Ember, demands an intricate balance of resource management, problem-solving, collaboration, adaptability, and hope. The novel ends with an optimistic note that by protecting the earth from destruction, the need to survive can be made easier for the future generation. The young protagonists' attempts to discover a way out of their desperate situation showcase their survival skills amidst a dark and deteriorating world.

**Keywords:** Survival, Apocalypse, Dystopia, Nature, Hope, Youth.

Dystopian literature is a genre of fictional writing that explores the social and political structures in a dark nightmare world. The term 'dystopia' means a bad place to live in. The theme of survival places an important part in these literature as humans strive hard to survive in an apocalyptic world, filled with terror and disaster. Dystopian narratives delve into how individuals and groups navigate oppressive regimes, environmental disasters, and societal breakdown. Dystopian literature not only portrays the near future but also warns humanity about the impending danger that is yet to come. Being a popular genre among the young readers dystopian literature provides awareness to the future generation to take precaution measures to save the world beforehand. To live in an apocalyptic world is unimaginable but to

prevent the world to face such destructions is possible. The major theme in every dystopian fiction is survival as every individual seeks to survive in a world filled with horror, need and control. The world in the present day is already facing disasters in terms of war, natural disasters and totalitarian control. People have already begun to find a peaceful place to live, away from terrors and disasters. Jeanne DuPrau, in her *The City of Ember*, stresses humanity's search for survival in a world devoid of proper food, air and light.

*The City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau was published in 2003, under the genre of Children Science Fiction. The book was followed by three sequels. It is based on a post-apocalyptic setting, whereby Ember, a futuristic city, built beneath the earth has been set up with enough resources to survive the population for the next two hundred years. However, after some period of time the supplies begin to run dangerously short and the two main protagonists of the novel Lina and Doon, young labourers, begin their quest to help escape Ember. In this story, the world has been ravaged by war, disease and classic apocalyptic repressions. Moving underground has become the only option for the people to escape unavoidable catastrophes of the above world. As a result, the city of Ember was constructed thousands of feet beneath the earth surface.

In the Ember city, everyone has an important role in surviving the rest of the society. The city itself was built on hope to survive. And that hope served humanity after a devastating war. But this hope deteriorates as the citizens forget to maintain the generators and the knowledge of the past is lost. Humanity was in the verge of extinction as there is scarcity for food and electricity. When Doon finds that their city is nearing destruction he wonders, "Running out of light bulbs, running out of power, running out of time — disaster was right around the corner" (48). Many known fruits and vegetables becomes a rare species to them. Lina's granny explains the sad reality about the non-availability of pineapple fruits which she relished in the past. She says, "There was something called pineapple, I remember that one especially... it was yellow and sweet... I had it four times before we ran out of it" (101).

The need to survive changes the character of each individual as some turns out to be selfish and greedy, and some loses hope. None tries to improve the state of the society as everyone lives for themselves. The governing body keeps the people in subtle subjugation. Children are assigned to work after their schooling has no choice for themselves to decide their work. Citizens are discouraged from creativity and are encouraged to behave in an orderly fashion for the good of the city. This allows the Mayor of the city to behave corruptly. The people suffer under their Mayor, who hoard provisions for himself rather than finding a way to help the citizen. The two main characters Lina and Doon explores multiple response to the oppression.

The city's disconnection with nature shows people's struggle to survive being detached from the blessings of nature. The city is built deep underground, where there is no sunlight. The city is alive with technology and machinery as they have special energy generators to supply electricity. But this energy supply cannot be as warm as the sun to illuminate the whole world endlessly. In the final part of the novel, the people are shocked to see the beauty of nature which seems entirely different from their life beneath in the Ember. When they reached the new world Lina realises that, "Everything around them was springing

to life. A glorious racket came from the branches ---tweedling notes, peeps, burbles, high sharp calls” (256). In addition, the novel also gives a warning to the people to safeguard the earth from destruction.

In spite of all odds, people survive because of family bond, friendship, hope and mutual help. Lina and Doon help each other whenever there is an obstacle in their way to find the new world out of Ember. Both of them love their families and take care of them. When Lina loses her grandmother a woman readily comes to help her in taking care of her little sister. She gives Lina and her baby sister a room in her house. Doon, who is portrayed in the beginning of the novel as a tough boy, later helps Lina find a way out of the Ember. The love for her baby sister and her concern towards her grandmother shows Lina’s importance for familial bond. When nobody trusted Lina, Doon readily helps her find the mysterious note that reveals the way out of Ember city. This friendly bond and care to help others eased people’s pain in a desperate city like Ember. This further shows that one can overcome all obstacles and achieve happiness with the help of love, friendship and support.

The urge to survive, makes Lina and Doon to discover a way out of the Ember city. Their hope of finding a new world finally comes true. After an adventurous struggle, the protagonists finally discover the real world to realise the fact that they had lived all their life underground. The novel intended for young readers, provides a positive final message stating that people can always find a solution for their problems in spite of the chronic fear. In the words of a British Writer, Bear Grylls, “Survival is not about being fearless. It’s about making a decision, getting on and doing it” (37). The struggles faced by the characters in the novel shows that, their efforts are not in vain.

Despite nature’s blessing, humans destroy it for their own selfish need, which in turn becomes a threat to them. Although scientific researchers find many possible ways to live in other planets, it can never equal their life on earth. Instead of spending more money on finding a new world, it is better to protect the earth from destruction. The way the people of Ember suffer, to survive, in a world devoid of sunlight and food, gives a warning for humanity to escape from such a situation in near future. The hope to survive, in spite of all odds make humans to be stronger and wiser.

### Works Cited

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