

Easy reading: The Hunger Games: Book review (level 3) – text

Is this exciting fantasy-thriller the new *Twilight*?

A literary phenomenon

The Hunger Games is a hugely successful book for teenagers and young adults by the American author Suzanne Collins. Since it was published in 2008 it has been translated into 26 different languages and has sold millions of copies around the world. It is also the first book for young readers to sell more than a million electronic copies. *The Hunger Games* is now a major Hollywood film and is just as successful. It made 152.5 million dollars in its opening weekend in North America alone!

A fight to the death

The story takes place in the future, after the destruction of North America. The country is called Panem and is made up of twelve poor districts governed by the wealthy Capitol. The Capitol holds absolute power over the nation. Each district is responsible for producing different things for the Capitol. District 12, where the story begins, provides all the coal for the country. There used to be a thirteenth district but they rebelled against the Capitol in the past and were destroyed.

The Hunger Games are an annual event, which the Capitol uses to remind the districts that they are being punished for rebelling. Every year one boy and one girl aged 12 to 18 are chosen from each district by lottery to compete in a battle in which only one person can survive. The chosen teenagers are called 'tributes'. The whole nation is forced to watch the event on television.

The heroine of the story, a 16-year-old girl called Katniss Everdeen, has lost her father in a mining accident and has to provide food for her family. She hunts in the woods around District 12 with her friend Gale and becomes very skilful with a bow and arrow. When her younger sister, Prim, is chosen as one of the tributes, Katniss volunteers to go instead. The other tribute from District 12 is a boy named Peeta and Katniss soon finds herself in a complicated relationship with him.

Where did the idea for *The Hunger Games* come from?

One night in 2003, Suzanne Collins was flipping between channels on TV. It was at the time of the US invasion of Iraq. The only programmes she could find on TV were 'reality' programmes of young people competing to win a million dollars and news programmes about the war. Suzanne says that the two things started to merge together in a disturbing way and the idea for *The Hunger Games* came to her.

She has always found news programmes of wars upsetting. When she was a child, her father was a pilot in the US air force and he fought in Vietnam. Her mother tried to protect her by not telling her what was happening in the war, but she still saw news programmes about the war and knew that her dad was there. It was a very frightening experience for her.

Another important inspiration for the book comes from Suzanne's love of classical Greek mythology. When she was a child, one of her favourite stories was Theseus and the Minotaur. In this story the city of Athens is ruled by Crete, but the Athenians rebel. As a punishment, Minos, the king of Crete, forces the Athenians to send seven boys and seven girls to Crete every year. The youths are thrown into the labyrinth and eaten by a monster that lives there called the Minotaur. But one of the youths, named Theseus, fights the Minotaur and kills it. Suzanne sees Katniss Everdeen as a futuristic Theseus. Another classical inspiration

comes from the ancient Roman games, where gladiators have to fight to the death for people's entertainment.

Too much violence?

As *The Hunger Games* has grown in popularity, some parents in the US have complained about the level of violence in the book and are concerned that it shows children killing each other. However, Suzanne says she was becoming more and more worried about how normal it is becoming to see violence on TV. She wanted to show people where this could lead in the future. Suzanne is also concerned about the amount of reality TV we watch nowadays. 'We're putting too much of our lives on TV,' she says. 'And we're so bombarded with imagery that we're becoming desensitised to it. It's OK to be desensitised to a sitcom, but when it's real tragedy, that's different. It's real life and it's not going to go away when the commercials come on.' She found the deaths and violence between young people in the story the hardest things to write and she hopes it will make people think about what they watch in future.

Books or films?

Suzanne isn't just concerned about what we watch. She's also very passionate about what we read. In this age of video games and texting, she thinks it's even more important for young people to keep reading books. 'Reading exposes you to so many different people, places and times,' she says. 'But more importantly, it's an intimate and personal experience. No one else is interpreting the material for you and it's an opportunity for your mind to meet the writer's mind.'

Brendan Dunne