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The Hunger Games

A book review for parents

This sci-fi novel is the first book in "The Hunger Games" series by Suzanne Collins and is published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc.

The Hunger Games is written for kids ages 13 and up. The age range reflects readability and not necessarily content appropriateness.



Plot Summary

Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen lives in the nation of Panem (a post-apocalyptic North America) with her mother and younger sister, Prim. Her family resides in District 12, the poorest of 12 districts ruled by the wealthy Capitol. Katniss provides for her mother and sister by hunting with her friend Gale in the forbidden woods nearby.

As punishment for the districts' rebellion attempt years earlier, the Capitol holds an annual televised event called The Hunger Games. Each district must draw the names of a boy and girl between the ages of 12 and 18. These 24 youths become contestants (called "tributes"), who must fight to the death in a vast arena created by the Capitol Gamemakers. The lone survivor returns home to wealth and fame.

One year, on the day of "reaping," Prim's name is drawn. Katniss volunteers to take her sister's place. The other tribute is Peeta Mellark, a baker's son who once saved Katniss' family from starvation by sneaking them bread. Guards put Katniss and Peeta on a train for the Capitol. Haymitch Abernathy, their trainer, accompanies them. He is the only District 12 tribute who has ever survived the Hunger Games.

The bored, wealthy people of the Capitol celebrate the Hunger Games with parties and parades. Capitol-appointed prep teams create an image for each tribute by providing costumes, makeovers and talking points. Tributes who impress the Capitol viewers win "sponsors" — or wealthy fans, who will fund gifts of food and equipment at critical points in the Games.

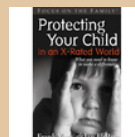
In his pre-Games TV interview, Peeta claims he's secretly loved his District 12 counterpart for years. Since tributes are always on camera, Katniss can never ask Peeta if his declaration is true or a ploy to attract attention. She plays along, and they draw many sponsors with their ill-fated romance.

After Olympic-like opening ceremonies, the tributes are thrown into an arena with miles of forestland. Eleven tributes die the first day as the contestants fight for the few supplies the Capitol has provided. Katniss takes off alone, hiding and hunting for several days until a group of allied tributes traps her in a tree. There, she finds a young tribute named Rue, who reminds her of her sister. They drop a nest of mutated yellow jackets on their opponents and escape. Their alliance and friendship are short-lived. Another boy kills Rue with a spear a few days later.

Playing on the audience's thirst for romance, the Gamemakers announce that if two members from the same district are the last two contestants, *both* may return home. Katniss finds Peeta and nurses the wounds he's acquired in a battle with another tribute.

When only one contestant besides Katniss and Peeta remains, the Gamemakers release a pack of vicious dog-like creatures. The beasts slowly maul the other boy to death. Katniss and Peeta believe they've won the Games, but at the last moment, a voice announces that the

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Things to Consider

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previous rule change has been revoked. Only one contestant can win, meaning the District 12 tributes must fight each other to the death. Peeta and Katniss threaten to eat poisonous berries simultaneously. The Gamemakers, knowing a double suicide will be an unsatisfying conclusion for the audience, quickly uphold their earlier ruling.

Though both teens are allowed to return to home, Haymitch tells Katniss that the Capitol is furious with their attempt to throw the Games. So even as she rides the train to District 12, Katniss senses she is anything but safe. She also learns that Peeta's love is real, but he's crushed to hear that Katniss is uncertain of her feelings for him. She's developed a deep fondness for Peeta, but she finds herself thinking more about Gale, a friend she used to illegally hunt with in the forest.

Christian Beliefs

None

Authority Roles

Katniss' father died in a mining accident several years earlier. She recalls his beautiful singing. Katniss' mother subsequently suffered a mental breakdown, leaving Katniss to support the family. Though Mother eventually improves, she is never the same nor does she reclaim the roles of parent or provider. Peeta's mother smacks him across the face for burning bread. Haymitch, District 12's sole Hunger Games winner in its 40+ year history, is Katniss and Peeta's official adviser. Known throughout the nation for his embarrassing alcohol-induced TV appearances, he sobers up some to help them form a strategy. He sends them gifts on the battlefield when they follow his orders. The dictatorial leaders of the Capitol, as well as its self-absorbed citizens, dress strangely and eat lavishly. In their existential boredom, they seek extreme "entertainment," which includes watching others suffer brutality and die gruesome deaths.

Other Belief Systems

A few times, Katniss mentions having good luck. Rue carries a good luck charm. Katniss says the woods where she hunts have been the savior of her and her family. She says her mother and sister can work magic with herbs (meaning that they're good at making and administering medicines). Before becoming a tribute, Katniss devoted her Sundays to hunting and trading with Gale.

Profanity/Graphic Violence

The word *h---* appears once. In this tale of 24 teenagers forced to kill each other, readers follow a number of gruesome, bloody and otherwise disturbing scenes. One tribute murders another by snapping his neck. Other tributes are killed by spears, arrows, blows to the head with rocks and the stings of mutated yellow jackets. Wounds ooze blood and puss, and the wounded smell festering flesh. One of the final tributes is mauled by a pack of rabid dog-like creatures for hours before he dies. Katniss also mentions how, in previous games, tributes were killed by venomous snakes, went insane from thirst or froze to death. One previous contestant tried to eat the tributes he'd killed, but the Gamemakers stopped this because it didn't play well with the audience. Leaders in the Capitol cut out the tongues of those who disobey them. Despite the many alarming images, readers find little if any *gratuitous* gore. The descriptions emphasize the horrible plight of the tributes and the gross desensitization of the Capitol dwellers.

Kissing/Sex/Homosexuality

Katniss and Peeta kiss a number of times and snuggle together for warmth in a sleeping bag.

Awards

The New York Times Bestseller, 2009-10; *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year, 2008; American Library Association (ALA) Best Book for Young Adults, 2009; and others.

Discussion Topics

If your children have read this book or someone has read it to them, consider these discussion topics:

How does Katniss feel whenever she thinks she owes someone?
To which characters in the book does she feel indebted, and why?
Do you ever find it awkward to accept kind words or gestures from others when you can't return the favor? Why or why not?
Have you ever given someone a gift you knew he couldn't repay?
How did you feel?
What would it be like to have the nation watching your every move on TV?
How might you behave differently than normal if the cameras were rolling?
What would you do if you could only survive by killing someone else?
What would you want viewers to remember about you?
Why does Katniss wonder if she can trust Peeta?
Why is it easier for her to trust Rue?
Which of Katniss' past experiences make it difficult for her to place her confidence in others?
Do you have difficulty trusting people?
Why is it sometimes hard to trust God?
How can you determine who is or isn't trustworthy?
What are some ways the Gamemakers, prep teams and trainers get the contestants to do their bidding?
Which, if any, of these people care about the tributes' thoughts and feelings?
If you were chosen as a tribute, would you have followed the orders you were given or rebelled? Explain your answer.
What happened to Katniss' mother after her father died?
Why is Katniss so angry with her mother?
What does she fear her mother will do in the future?
Have you ever known someone who suffered from depression?
What kinds of depression treatments are available in our society that weren't in Katniss'?
If you had a friend struggling with depression, what could you say or do to help?
Why does Katniss say she'll never have kids?
What does she fear about the future?
Does it scare *you* to think about raising kids in our society? Explain your answer.
What does the Bible say you should do when you feel afraid?
How can you prevent fear from influencing your decisions and crushing your hopes?
What are the Capitol people like?
How are they different from those in the districts?
How are the Capitol residents entertained, rather than repulsed, by the violence and death in the Hunger Games?
Does a scenario like this — where people are forced to fight each other to amuse a crowd — seem far-fetched?
What has happened like this in history?
Could it happen in the future?
Which characters value human life, and which do not?
Why does Gale advise Katniss to forget that her fellow tributes are *people*?
Why might it be easier for Katniss to kill her competitors if she visualizes them as animals?
Does our country value human life? Explain your answer.
Name some situations in which people have tried to justify cruelty or murder by convincing themselves that a particular group of individuals was not really human.
After winning the Hunger Games, how does Katniss view her future?
Why doesn't she feel joy and relief?
How do you think she will change as a result of her experiences in the Hunger Games?
Does this story have a happy ending? Explain your answer.

Notes: Like the Hunger Games tributes in the Capitol arena, many early Christians faced cruel deaths in the Roman Colosseum. Parents or teachers could study the persecution of early Christ followers and compare/contrast those believers with the Hunger Games contestants.

Mythology: The book's plot was influenced by the Greek myth in which King Minos requires 7 boys and 7 girls from Athens to battle the Minotaur in a labyrinth.

Alcohol: Haymitch drinks constantly. He is often drunk and humiliating himself, like when he vomits all over the floor of the train en route to the Capitol. The prep team gives Katniss wine at a dinner, but after drinking half of one glass, she feels foggy and switches to water. She says she can't understand how Haymitch can stand being in a fog all the time. Instead of observing Katniss and rating her pre-Games performance, the intoxicated Gamemakers ignore her and sing drinking songs.

Gambling: The Hunger Games are a hotbed of gambling, not unlike big sporting events of today.

Nudity: The prep team examines Katniss in the nude, and she's often naked in their presence as they prepare her for TV appearances. The mentions of nudity, neither graphic nor sexual, emphasize how Katniss is viewed as an object to be modified rather than a human being.

Illegal activity: Katniss and Gale hunt illegally. They sell some of what they gather and/or kill on the city's black market. Nearly all District 12 citizens rely on the black market for survival.

Read *Plugged In's* insight about young adult book trends at [Teen Lit: Now Without Witches!](#)

Book reviews cover the content, themes and worldviews of fiction books, not their literary merit, and equip parents to decide whether a book is appropriate for their children. A book's inclusion does not constitute an endorsement by Focus on the Family.

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