

## Q&A with Hunger Games Author Suzanne Collins

The author of the Hunger Games says we need to get real about war, violence, and TV.

By [Hannah Trierweiler Hudson](#)

Six years ago, a savvy audience of teachers and kids fell for the Underland Chronicles, a Wonderland-like series about a boy named Gregor who discovers a magical universe underneath New York City. Now the rest of the world has caught on to Suzanne Collins's captivating storytelling, devouring her dystopian Hunger Games trilogy.

Along with the success of the series — about teens in a postapocalyptic United States forced to fight to the death on television — have come the inevitable challenges and discussion of what kids can handle. But with the publication of *Mockingjay*, the third and final title, the Hunger Games is more popular than ever. Collins argues that not only can kids contend with the books' complicated themes, but that we need to talk with students about violence, war, and the difficult search for "reality" in our media-saturated world.

### **The Hunger Games is hugely popular with both boys and girls. Why do you think that is?**

Whenever I write a story, I hope it appeals to both boys and girls. But maybe in its simplest form, it's having a female protagonist in a gladiator story, which traditionally features a male. It's an unexpected choice. Or I don't know, maybe the futuristic, grim nature of the story is larger than that. I wouldn't care who was the lead in a good dystopian story. You know what I mean?

### **What's been the most memorable feedback you've gotten from teachers and kids?**

One of the most memorable things I hear is when someone tells me that my books got a reluctant reader to read. They'll say, "You know, there's this kid and he wouldn't touch a book and his parents found him under a blanket with a flashlight after bedtime because he couldn't wait to find out what happened in the next chapter." That's just the best feeling. The idea that you might have contributed to a child's enjoyment of reading.

### **Who contributed to your love of reading and writing?**

In fifth and sixth grade, I went to school in an open classroom. And the English teacher, Miss Vance, was wonderful. On rainy days, she would take whoever was interested over to the side and read us Edgar Allan Poe stories. I remember all of us sitting around just wide-eyed as she read "The Telltale Heart" or "The Mask of the Red Death." She didn't think we were too young to hear it. And we were riveted. That made a huge impression on me.

### **If only we could all know a Miss Vance! How do you convince the adults who are more concerned about your themes?**

I think it's how you present it. Kids will accept any number of things. The Underland Chronicles — which I wrote for kids the same age as I was when Miss Vance read me Edgar Allan Poe — features death, loss, and violence. The third book has biological warfare, the fourth book has genocide, the fifth book has a very graphic war. And I wondered if at some point that was going to become a problem. Not for the kids so much but for parents or schools. And it never seemed to. I think somehow if you went on that journey with me from the beginning, you kind of worked into the more violent places and were prepared by what had come before.

### **What drew you to writing science fiction?**

Telling a story in a futuristic world gives you this freedom to explore things that bother you in contemporary times. So, in the case of the Hunger Games, issues like the vast discrepancy of wealth, the power of television and how it's used to influence our lives, the possibility that the government could use hunger as a weapon, and then first and foremost to me, the issue of war.

### **War seems to be a very important theme for you.**

My father was career Air Force and was also a Vietnam veteran. He was in Vietnam the year I was six. But beyond that, he was a doctor of political science, he was a military specialist, he was very well educated. And he talked about war with us from very early on. It was very important to him that we understood things, I think because of both what he did and what he had experienced.

If you went to a battlefield with him you didn't just stand there. You would hear what led up to this war and to this particular battle, what transpired there, and what the fallout was. It wasn't like, there's a field. It would be, here's a story.

### **How does war connect to your concerns about TV, especially reality TV?**

The Hunger Games is a reality television program. An extreme one, but that's what it is. And while I think some of those shows can succeed on different levels, there's also the voyeuristic thrill, watching people being humiliated or brought to tears or suffering physically. And that's what I find very disturbing. There's this potential for desensitizing the audience so that when they see real tragedy playing out on the news, it doesn't have the impact it should. It all just blurs into one program. And I think it's very important not just for young people, but for adults to make sure they're making the distinction. Because the young soldier's dying in the war in Iraq, it's not going to end at the commercial break. It's not something fabricated, it's not a game. It's your life.

### **How do you think teachers can help children be more conscious about the media they're consuming?**

Well, the first distinction is what is real and what is not real. I've written for children's television for a long time and very young children don't even have the capacity to distinguish. But as kids get older, you have to sit down with them on a case-by-case basis and say, "You know, this is a game, this is made up," and make sure they understand. Then, "This is news footage, this really happened," so that children understand someone getting voted off a show is not the same thing as a tsunami.

That's an extreme example, but they have to know that it's not just stuff that happens in this box and it's contained and you can turn it on and off. That there's real life occurring that doesn't end when the commercials roll.

### **Television isn't the only place kids make that distinction.**

Absolutely. There's an infinite amount of material on the Internet. And then there's movies. Kids have so much screen time, and it's a concern. I know how overloaded I can feel sometimes. When I was a kid, the news stood out as different from other programming. And now, you've got hundreds of channels and innumerable things to click on the Web. And I wonder if it all begins to acquire a sameness.

### **Do you think real-world kids have the same opportunities as your heroine, Katniss, to make a difference in society?**

The interesting thing about Katniss is when the story begins, she doesn't have much political awareness. There are things she knows about her world to be true and untrue. But no one has ever educated her in that area. It is not in the Capitol's interest that she know anything about politics. And there's only the one TV channel, which is completely controlled by the Capitol. And so she is struggling to put things together as she goes through the series, and it's quite difficult, because no one seems to think it's in their interest to educate her.

So it's interesting, because even though hers is an extreme case, I think all of us have to work to figure out what's going on. It's hard to get the truth and then to put it in a larger perspective.

**You have to do the work.**

Right. And sometimes you don't have the tools to do the work, because you can't verify what's being presented to you. You have to take it on trust, or you can disbelieve out of hand something that you're seeing on television or online. So you have to work very hard to, first of all, decide what you believe to be a true and a fair representation of something. And then to form an opinion about it, and then possibly to take action on it. It's confusing and it's hard.

**It is! What advice do you give to young writers?**

A lot of people tell writers to write about what they know. And that's good advice, because it gives you a lot of things to draw on. But I always like to add that they should write about things that they love. And by that I mean things that fascinate or excite them personally.

The Hunger Games is full of things that intrigue me; you know, it's dystopia, it's got kids in it, it's gladiators, it's war, there are genetic mutations. The Underland Chronicles has fantasy, animals, sword fighting. And if you write about things that you feel passionately about, it is so much easier to write.

# A Killer Story: An Interview with Suzanne Collins, Author of 'The Hunger Games'

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Rick Margolis

## Suzanne Collins's 'The Hunger Games' has plenty of blood, guts, and heart

**Thanks to a cruel futuristic government, 24 children are chosen by lottery to compete in the annual Hunger Games—a fight to the death that's televised live. How did you come up with that idea?**

It's very much based on the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, which I read when I was eight years old. I was a huge fan of Greek and Roman mythology. As punishment for displeasing Crete, Athens periodically had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete, where they were thrown into the labyrinth and devoured by the Minotaur, which is a monster that's half man and half bull. Even when I was a little kid, the story took my breath away, because it was so cruel, and Crete was so ruthless.

**You're not kidding.**

The message is, mess with us and we'll do something worse than kill you—we'll kill your children. And the parents sat by apparently powerless to stop it. The cycle doesn't end until Theseus volunteers to go, and he kills the Minotaur. In her own way, Katniss [the heroine of *The Hunger Games*] is a futuristic Theseus. But I didn't want to do a labyrinth story. So I decided to write basically an updated version of the Roman gladiator games.

**What inspired you to write it?**

One night, I was lying in bed, and I was channel surfing between reality TV programs and actual war coverage. On one channel, there's a group of young people competing for I don't even know; and on the next, there's a group of young people fighting in an actual war. I was really tired, and the lines between these stories started to blur in a very unsettling way. That's the moment when Katniss's story came to me.

**Why did those programs speak to you so deeply?**

When I was a kid, my dad fought in Vietnam. He was gone for a year. Even though my mom tried to protect us—I'm the youngest of four—sometimes the TV would be on, and I would see footage from the war zone. I was little, but I would hear them say "Vietnam," and I knew my dad was there, and it was very frightening. I'm sure that a lot of people today experience that same thing. But there is so much programming, and I worry that we're all getting a little desensitized to the images on our televisions. If you're watching a sitcom, that's fine. But if there's a real-life tragedy unfolding, you should not be thinking of yourself as an audience member. Because those are real people on the screen, and they're not going away when the commercials start to roll.

**What was the most difficult part of writing the story?**

When you're going to write a story like *The Hunger Games*, you have to accept from the beginning that you're going to kill characters. It's a horrible thing to do, and it's a horrible thing to write, particularly when you have to take out a character that is vulnerable or young or someone you've grown to love when you were writing them.



Photograph by Matt Peyton