

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Hunger Games

If you have a young daughter or granddaughter, you have no doubt heard of *The Hunger Games*, the first of three novels written by Suzanne Collins. A remarkable best-seller that has enthralled young girls and boys, it is now a blockbuster movie, setting records for a just-released movie. It is an engaging and provocative story, filled with themes and underlying messages, not incompatible with biblical Christianity. A summary of the story:

Imagine the following: North America has been destroyed and in its place is a new nation called Panem. With 13 Districts and a tyrannical Capitol, all the people can do is try to survive while the Capitol resides in luxury. The Districts, which consist of the working class people, provide the Capitol population with everything it needs to remain in power and sustain its luxurious lifestyle. This is the nature of the oppression and dystopia called Panem. With this kind of oppression, District 13 decides to mount an uprising. The Capitol strikes a deal with them—it will destroy their buildings as they seek refuge underground, and tell the other districts they have been destroyed by nuclear weapons. Therefore, with the goal of maintaining control and to sustain its luxury, Panem seeks a constant reminder of its control and that the districts are weak—the Hunger Games. Every year, each of the 12 Districts send two tributes, one boy and one girl, to fight in an arena to the death; the last child standing is the winner. With obvious allusions to the entertainment associated with the ancient Roman Coliseum, the Hunger Games are the entertainment for the masses in a technologically advanced culture: There are horse-drawn chariots, laurel wreaths and a game-show host called Caesar. These annual games are televised and mandatory viewing for each citizen of Panem.

The heroine of the story and movie is Katniss Everdeen, who lives in the extremely impoverished District 12 with her mother and younger sister, Prim, whom Katniss loves dearly. [The father was killed in the collapse of a mine in District 12.] Because of the extreme grief of Katniss's mother, she now is raising Prim, providing the care and love that her mother cannot. Jann FritzHuspen correctly summarizes Katniss: “[She] is clever, resourceful, and creative, but she shuns other people beyond her own family members and her one friend and hunting partner, Gale.” Gale, whose father also was killed in the mines, hunts small animals illegally to provide food for his family. He teaches Katniss how to hunt and other survival skills. At the annual “reaping,” when one boy and one girl is drawn to see who will fight to the death in the Hunger Games, Prim's name is called. Instantly, Katniss steps up to take Prim's place; she will be her substitute in the games. The boy chosen is Peeta, whom Katniss knows from school. As Katniss prepares to say goodbye to District 12, a young girl from her class pins a gold brooch on her outfit—a small circle of gold with a center of a bird holding an arrow: An important symbol in *The Hunger Games*.

Peeta and Katniss are the tributes representing District 12. Peeta and Katniss struggle through the games to keep one another alive, and, at the end, they are the two survivors. When she gives Peeta and herself poisonous berries, Katniss outwits the Capitol. They both seemingly die, but after the show ends, they spit out the berries and the Capitol must declare, for the first time, two Hunger Games winners.

How should we think about this narrative? Are there themes on which we can encourage our children and grandchildren to focus? I believe there are. Several suggestions:

1. In her book and in the movie, Collins takes on the major themes of the human condition — war, power, sacrifice, personal ethics, oppression of the have-nots by the haves, and the brutal realities associated with our increasingly voyeuristic culture. These are not insignificant themes but are ones about which Scripture says much. The book and movie can be a stimulus to helpful and fruitful discussions on these major themes of life.
2. Whether intentionally or not, Collins has given us a picture of what our culture could be some day. If the United States continues on its present path of “self-gratification, situational ethics, and excesses of all kinds,” Panem may not be that unimaginable. There is no question that Collins wants us to draw conscious connections between Panem and ancient Rome. The children of the Hunger Games are similar to the gladiators of ancient Rome. The luxury of the Capitol in Panem is disgustingly similar to the luxury of ancient Rome. Both Panem and Rome rest on the oppression of the weak and the poor by the powerful and the rich.
3. Throughout the story, Katniss maintains the moral high ground. She is a strong female protagonist driven by love for family rather than lust for a boy. During the Games, she fights to save not only her own life but also the lives of other tributes as well. As Emily Whitten of *World* has written, “The value of life, even in such horrific circumstances, is drawn with bold colors.”
4. The Hunger Games is likewise a poignant and penetrating critique of our voyeuristic culture. In an interview dealing with TV reality shows, Collins stated that “. . . they’re often set up as games and, like sporting events, there’s an interest in seeing who wins. . . . Sometimes they have very talented people performing. Then there’s the voyeuristic thrill—watching people being humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffering physically—which I find very disturbing. There’s also the potential for desensitizing the audience, so that when they see real tragedy playing out on, say, the news, it doesn’t have the impact it should.”
5. In addition, The Hunger Games posits several other important themes:
 - Panem is a godless, nihilistic society in which there is no hope and little purpose for living. It is a perfect example of a culture where power is supreme and what culture can look like without God.

- The theme of self-sacrifice is at the heart of the character, Katniss Everdeen. This is clearly manifested in taking her sister Prim's place in the Games but also in how she relates to other tributes.
- Katniss is a heroine who does not sleep with other boys or men and who in effect promotes chastity as a core value.
- Perseverance is a key theme of the story. Neither Katniss nor Peeta give up. Their endurance and shrewdness are affirmed!
- Panem is a classic example of what raw power does. It is self-serving and ultimately self-destructive. Political power is self-serving and corrupt. The current dysfunction of our government at all levels is increasingly becoming an ethical issue. The power of the American state over all aspects of our lives is not to be ignored.
- Panem is also a powerful critique of a society that no longer looks to God for its source of ethics and morals. In Panem, decisions of right and wrong are not sourced in God but in the state; the state declares what is right and wrong. Situational ethics predominate and decisions are made on what best serves the state.
- In *The New Yorker* magazine, Laura Miller writes, “. . . dystopian stories for adults and children have essentially the same purpose—to warn us about the dangers of some current trend. That's certainly true of books like “1984” and “Brave New World”; they detail the consequences of political authoritarianism and feckless hedonism. This is what will happen if we don't turn back now, they scold, and scolding makes sense when your readers have a shot at getting their hands on the wheel.” *The Hunger Games*, as a book and now a movie, offer another warning of what our world could be like, perhaps sooner rather than later. For me, it is a persuasive essay on what culture can look like without God: Power replaces righteousness and self-gratification replaces self-sacrifice. Both are self-destructive in nature—and we see that every day on TV, in Washington, D.C. and in many corporate board rooms and labor union councils. May God use even something as innocuous as *The Hunger Games* to awaken our culture to its self-destructive mannerisms and choices. May it cause us to return to the Lord.

See Laura Miller in *The New Yorker* (14 June 2010); Jann FritzHuspen, “Book Review and Parents' Guide: The Hunger Games Trilogy,” <http://catholiclane.com> (3 January 2012); Emily Whitten, *World* (7 April 2012).