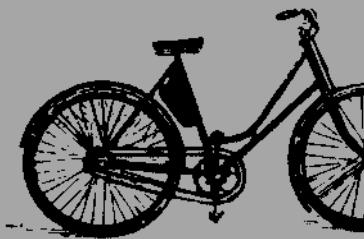


Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"I don't know what you mean when you say "the whole world" or "generations before him." I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now."

—Jonas, *The Giver*

The *Giver* is a science-fiction novel that takes place in a "very different culture and time," Lowry says. The author establishes the book's unusual setting in a number of ways.

One way Lowry establishes the book's setting is by making Jonas's world one full of rules, some familiar, others totally strange. There are rules about keeping feelings hidden, about having more than two children—one male, one female—in each family unit, and about bragging, among other things. There are so many rules, in fact, that each household has the community's Book of Rules as one of the three books that it is allowed to—and required to—own.

Lowry also places readers in unfamiliar territory with the words she uses to describe things that are familiar to us. For instance, a family becomes a family unit, a home becomes a dwelling, and a stuffed animal becomes a comfort object.

In addition to making the familiar unfamiliar with her use of words, Lowry uses capitalization to remove the reader from any familiar time and place. The author capitalizes the names of important events and ceremonies, such as the Naming, when newchildren are given their names and the Ceremony of Twelve, when children are given their lifetime work Assignments. Lowry also capitalizes words that identify people's positions in the community. For instance, Jonas's dad is a Nurturer, Jonas is a Twelve, the man who trains him is The Receiver, then The Giver.

Another way Lowry establishes her unfamiliar setting is by giving the reader a community in which people's lives are mapped out for them from birth to death. A baby is raised in the Nurturing Center. At the December ceremony it is Named and delivered to his or her new family unit. Each successive December that child moves up to the next age group and assumes that group's rights and responsibilities. At the Ceremony of Twelve the child will be assigned his or her lifelong job in the community. Eventually, an adult may apply to receive a spouse. Then the Committee of Elders monitors the couple for three years before allowing the spouses to apply for children. Once their children are grown, the spouses move into a group home, where they live with other Childless Adults. Eventually, when they are old enough, they go to live at the House of the Old, where they live out their final days, until they are released from the community.

Lowry also establishes the uniqueness—and eeriness—of her setting by showing that there is no privacy. There is always someone watching you, and someone listening to you. The reader sees that Jonas is being watched when the boy recalls an

incident when he took an apple home from the recreation area and, later, hears this public announcement: "ATTENTION. THIS IS A REMINDER TO MALE ELEVENS THAT OBJECTS ARE NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM THE RECREATION AREA AND THAT SNACKS ARE TO BE EATEN, NOT HOARDED." The speakers in each home are not just for public announcements, they are for private listening. So when family members are required to share feelings and dreams with one another, they are also sharing them with whomever is listening in at the other end of that speaker. The only person who can turn off this speaker and listening device is The Receiver, or The Giver, as Jonas comes to call him.

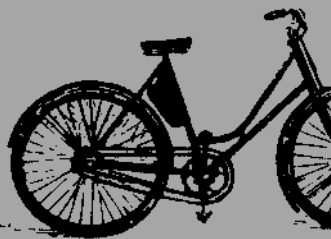
Jonas's world is also a place that Lowry makes different by making it all the same. The Giver tells Jonas that before the community chose to go to Sameness there were hills, there was snow, there were colors. Many of the differences we take for granted in our world are missing from Jonas's.

Lowry uses all of the above and more to turn a world that is familiar—a world where children go to school, play catch, ride bikes, get annoyed at little sisters, snuggle stuffed animals, and coo at babies—into a world that is terribly strange.

Thinking about the setting

- Does *The Giver* take place anywhere that's familiar to you?
- When does *The Giver* take place?
- What first told you that *The Giver* takes place in a very different culture and time?

Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



“‘Giver,’ Jonas suggested, ‘you and I don’t need to care about the rest of them.’”

“The Giver looked at him with a questioning smile. Jonas hung his head. Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything.”

– *The Giver*

Connections

The importance of making connections is one of the major themes in *The Giver*. Lowry says that the book speaks to “the vital need for humans to be aware of their interdependence, not only with each other, but with the world and its environment.”

When Jonas begins his training, The Giver says that he must transmit “the memories of the whole world” to Jonas. Because The Giver has all these memories, his life is much richer than the lives of other members of the community. He can see color, he can hear music, he can feel love. But he can also feel pain, and that is a great burden to him. When Jonas sees The Giver

suffering, he wants to help him. “What is it that makes you suffer so much?” he asks. “If you gave some of it to me, maybe your pain would be less.”

The Giver does give Jonas pain, and Jonas suffers from these memories, but not as much as if he had to bear them alone. He is glad that he can share them with The Giver, though he wishes the memories could be shared by the whole community. The Giver agrees. “The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It’s the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared.”

The Giver and Jonas work out a plan to return the memories to the community. It means Jonas must leave and never come back. Although Jonas is sad to leave The Giver, and initially wants his friend to leave with him, he knows that The Giver must stay. He needs to help the others. As Jonas realizes, “Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything.”

Lowry feels her connectedness to others even when she’s alone at her desk writing. “When I’m working in isolation, I feel I have a great bond with a world of people, of children, and adults who care about things, who feel the same way about things. That’s what Jonas didn’t have.”

Choice

Choice—which Jonas had very little of—is another important theme in this book. Lowry says, “*The Giver* relates to me in probably the same way it relates to everybody—it is a reminder of

the importance of the choices we make; also of the value of our freedom to make choices.”

Jonas is made aware of the importance of choices we make when he looks back at the choices the community has made. He sees all that has been lost since the community decided to go to Sameness: snow, hills, sleds, color, and choice.

He truly regrets the loss of choice. “If everything’s the same,” he says, “then there aren’t any choices! I want to wake up in the morning and *decide* things! A blue tunic, or a red one?”

Then The Giver points out that along with the freedom of choice comes the possibility of making the wrong choices. Jonas understands the community’s reasoning behind taking away choice. He almost believes it. “We really have to protect people from wrong choices,” he says. It’s “much safer.” But even as he speaks these words, he feels uneasy with them.

Freedom versus security

Loss of choice is loss of freedom, and another important theme in *The Giver* is freedom versus security. Lowry describes the perfect world she created in the book: “I tried to make Jonas’s world seem familiar, comfortable, and safe, and I tried to seduce the reader. I seduced myself along the way. It did feel good, that world. I got rid of all the things I fear and dislike: all the violence, prejudice, poverty, and injustice; and I even threw in good manners as a way of life because I liked the idea of it. . . . It was very, very tempting to leave it at that. But I’ve never been a writer

of fairy tales. And if I've learned anything . . . it is that we can't live in a walled world, in an 'only us, only now' world, where we are all the same and feel safe. We would have to sacrifice too much."

Jonas, in choosing to run away, comes to the same conclusion. He knows that if he gets caught, "he would very likely be killed. But," he thinks, "what did that matter? If he stayed, his life was no longer worth living."

Even when he and Gabe are cold and starving, and Jonas wonders if he made the right choice to run away, he can't help believing that he did. He knows that if he had stayed in the community, he would not be starving. But, "if he had stayed, he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love."

Jonas was unwilling to give up all that. He was also unwilling to sacrifice his humanity—his ability to care for others—for the safety and security his community provided. He could not live in a place that would kill a baby because he did not sleep through the night.

Sameness versus diversity

One area where Jonas's community finds security is in Sameness, which leads to the theme of sameness versus diversity. On this subject, Lowry says, "I think that people are always more comfortable with familiar things. It is not easy to stand out, and that's why teenagers like to wear the same

sneakers as other teenagers. The world of *The Giver* is a world where nobody has to take any risks. It's a very safe and comfortable world."

So much is the same in Jonas's world: He and his groupmates wear the same kind of clothes, they ride the same kind of bicycles, they have the same kind of family units. The streets are flat, the weather is unvarying, there is no color. Until he spends time with The Giver, Jonas is unaware of this Sameness. Once he learns of it, though, he is unhappy with it. He wants colors, he wants snow and hills and sleds. When The Giver explains that they had to let go of some things to gain control of others, Jonas says, "We shouldn't have!"

When Jonas runs away from his community, from Sameness, he finds a world of unexpected pleasures: "After a life of Sameness and predictability, he was awed by the surprises that lay beyond each curve of the road."

Individuality

In a community that values Sameness, there is no room for individuality, which is another theme in *The Giver*. In Jonas's community, being your own person is frowned upon. The Chief Elder says at the Ceremony of Twelve, "You Elevens have spent all your years till now learning to fit in, to standardize your behavior, to curb any impulse that might set you apart from the group." It is only in their Assignments that their differences are acknowledged and honored.

Children do not celebrate individual birthdays, they do not even know their actual birthdays; instead, they turn the next age with their groupmates at the December Ceremonies. When The Giver gives Jonas the memory of a birthday party, “with one child singled out and celebrated on his day,” Jonas comes to understand “the joy of being an individual, special and unique and proud.”

Honesty

Honesty is another theme in *The Giver*. When Jonas receives the rules and instructions that he must follow in his training, he is most disturbed by the final rule, “You may lie.” He has been trained since he was a very young child never to lie. When he hears this, he wonders whether others, upon becoming Twelves, have been told, “You may lie.” Do adults lie to him? He knows, given his rules and instructions, that he could ask adults—his parents, even—if they lie. “But,” he thinks, “he would have no way of knowing if the answer he received were true.”

He learns that his father has lied to him when he watches the tape of his father euthanizing the newborn twin. When talking about the “release” the night before, Jonas had asked his father about the procedure, had specifically asked if somebody else came to get the baby, somebody from Elsewhere, and his father had said yes, “That’s right, Jonas-bonus.” When Jonas sees that his father actually kills the baby, he is horrified. And he is angry.

“He *lied* to me,” Jonas cries. The Giver tries to console Jonas, telling him that his father was just doing what he was told to do. “He knows nothing,” he tells Jonas.

Jonas asks if The Giver lies to him, too. “I am empowered to lie,” The Giver says. “But I have never lied to you.” The Giver has made the choice to be honest.

Family

Another theme in this book is family. What makes a family? In *The Giver*, families are called family units. They do not start with a man and woman falling in love and deciding to start a family, families start with a man or a woman applying for a spouse. Then, once the committee matches them with one, the couple must prove their compatibility for three years before they are allowed to apply for a child.

Children are not born in a family, they are born in a Birthing Center by Birthmothers. They are raised in a Nurturing Center until the December after their birth, at which time they are given to parents the committee has chosen from among the applicants. Each family unit is allowed one male and one female child.

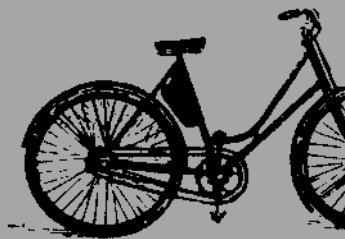
When children are grown, the parents move out of the family dwelling to live with other Childless Adults. They are no longer part of their children’s lives. There is no intergenerational connectedness. There are no grandparents.

Jonas does not miss grandparents, or know to miss them, until The Giver gives him his favorite memory, which involves several generations of people sitting around a Christmas tree opening gifts. He tells The Giver, “I can see that it wasn’t a very practical way to live, with the Old right there in the same place, where maybe they wouldn’t be well taken care of, the way they are now, and that we have a better-arranged way of doing things. But anyway, I was thinking, I mean feeling, actually, that it was kind of nice, then. And that I wish we could be that way, and that you could be my grandparent.” Jonas sees—and wants—a family that is bound not just by duty and obligation, but by love.

Thinking about the themes

- What do *you* think is the most important theme in *The Giver*?
- How much would you be willing to give up to live in a safe and secure world? Would you give up as much as the people in Jonas’s community?
- What are the good and bad things about Jonas’s family?

Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



There are about ten speaking characters in this book. The two main characters are Jonas and The Giver. Other important characters are Gabriel, Jonas's father, and Jonas's best friend, Asher.

Here is a list of characters. Following that, there is a brief description of each of the main characters.

Jonas	a boy turning twelve
The Giver	the person who holds the memories of the world
Gabriel	a baby Jonas grows to love, called Gabe
Father	Jonas's father
Mother	Jonas's mother
Lily	Jonas's younger sister
Asher	Jonas's best friend
Fiona	Jonas's friend
Larissa	a woman in the House of the Old
Chief Elder	the leader of the community

Jonas: Jonas, the main character in the book, is an eleven-year-old boy on the verge of becoming an adult in his community. Jonas is an introspective boy who thinks a good deal about what is happening around him. He is also curious, considerate, observant, intelligent, and brave.

From the beginning, it is clear that Jonas spends a lot of time thinking. He struggles to find just the right word to describe his feelings regarding the upcoming Ceremony of Twelve. He wonders about the apple that seemed to have changed while he was playing catch with Asher. He thinks about dreams, replaying them in his head. He tries to imagine how things might be different for the whole community.

Jonas is also curious. He wants to experience everything, despite the pain it might cause him. He wants to know about Elsewhere. He asks his father and The Giver about release. He takes full advantage of being able to ask The Giver questions.

That Jonas is very observant is especially obvious during and after the Ceremony of Twelve. He notices the hush in the crowd when the Chief Elder skips over him while making the Assignments; he notices his groupmates trying not to make eye contact; he notices the worried look on the face of his group leader. And he notices how Asher and others seem to treat him differently after he is given his Assignment.

Because he is so observant, Jonas can see when people are uncomfortable or need help, and is considerate in offering it. When he first meets The Giver, and the man says of his memories, "I am so *weighted* with them," Jonas feels "a terrible concern for the man." And when The Giver is miserable with pain, Jonas asks him to share it. "If you gave some of it to me, maybe your pain would be less," he says. And, just as he is willing to take away the man's greatest pain, he is unwilling to take away his greatest pleasure. When The Giver offers to give

Jonas some music before he leaves, Jonas refuses. “No, Giver,” he says. “I want you to keep that, to have with you, when I’m gone.”

Jonas shows his intelligence in a number of ways. He realizes that if his instructions tell him he can lie, the adults around him may lie to him, and that he will never know if they do because they do not have to answer him truthfully. After learning of colors, and how they were done away with when the community went to Sameness, Jonas says, “We shouldn’t have!” He even shows his intelligence when he and Gabe run away: He uses memories of snow to cool them off so they will avoid detection by the search planes’ heat-seeking devices, and memories of warmth to keep from freezing to death.

Finally, Jonas is brave. He does not feel brave when the Chief Elder describes him as such at the Ceremony of Twelve, but he goes on to show that he is very brave indeed. He is brave when he volunteers to take painful memories from The Giver to ease his burden. And he is brave when he runs away with Gabe. He risks capture, and with it almost certain death, but he knows that he has no choice. He has to run away to find a real life for himself, and he has to run away to let Gabe live his life.

The Giver: The Giver is another major character in this book. He is the current Receiver of Memory, and he trains Jonas to be his replacement. This man, one of the Elders in the community, is old beyond his years. Holding the memories of the whole world, alone, has worn him down. “This job has aged me,” he tells Jonas. Through the course of the book, we see him as a considerate, loving, wise, and kind man.

The Giver shows his consideration in the memories he gives Jonas. He tries for a long while to avoid giving the boy painful memories. When he finally realizes he must—that it is his job and that he must lighten his burden—he feels awful. He cannot look at Jonas after giving him the memory of war. “Forgive me,” he says.

Jonas also learns the true meaning of love from The Giver, as he is a very loving man. The Giver’s favorite memory, which he gives to Jonas—of an extended family seated around a Christmas tree exchanging gifts—is suffused with love. Later, when The Giver tells Jonas about Rosemary, he reminds the boy of that memory. He tells him that that was the feeling he had for Rosemary. “I loved her,” he says. “I feel it for you, too.”

The Giver is also wise. He knows that the community pays far too great a price for safety and security. “There are so many things I could tell them,” The Giver tells Jonas about the Committee of Elders. “I wish they would change. But they don’t want change. Life here is so orderly, so predictable—so painless. It’s what they’ve chosen.”

In his wisdom, and with Jonas’s help, The Giver finally realizes that he must do something to bring about change. “Having you here with me over the past year has made me realize that things must change. For years I’ve felt they should, but it seemed so hopeless. Now for the first time I think there might be a way.” And he works out a plan for Jonas to leave the community, thus returning all the memories back to the people.

The Giver is also kind. He could run away with Jonas—the boy repeatedly asks him to—but he refuses. He tells Jonas, “Remember how I helped you in the beginning, when the receiving of memories was new to you? . . . You needed me then. And now they will.”

Gabriel: Gabriel is a baby that Jonas’s father brings home at night for extra nurturing. He is small for his age and does not sleep through the night, so the Committee has labeled him Inadequate. If he does not grow and learn to sleep through the night, the Committee will release him.

We know very little about Gabe: He has pale eyes, he is able to receive memories, and he sleeps poorly. But he is still an important character in the book. Through him, Jonas learns to give as well as receive memories. Gabe, and his impending release, force Jonas to run away early, taking the baby with him. The baby also gives Jonas a reason for living, for continuing the journey when he is starved and exhausted and almost without hope. Gabe is “the one person left for him to love.” He is also Jonas’s link with, and hope for, the future.

Father: Jonas’s father is another important character in *The Giver*. He is quiet, thoughtful, and playful with babies and children. He is the only adult in the story who we hear using nicknames: He calls his daughter Lily-billy, his son Jonas-bonus.

His most important role in the book may be to help show Jonas that all is not as it appears. Jonas’s father loves newchildren and spends his days happily caring for them. Yet he releases—

kills—they when their presence would somehow disrupt the community. He releases a newborn twin who might cause confusion in the community. When Jonas watches his father release the newborn, he sees the sacrifice his community makes for orderliness; he sees the lies everyone—including his father—must tell to make it all seem right. When Jonas learns that his father has voted to release Gabriel, because the baby does not sleep through the night, he knows he must run away and take the baby with him.

Asher: Asher, another Eleven, is Jonas’s best friend. He has a cheerful disposition and always talks too fast and mixes up words. He is someone everyone enjoys, because he is fun and makes a game out of everything. Once Jonas gets memories, he realizes that he loves Asher. He also realizes that without memories, Asher cannot love him back.

Thinking about the characters

- Who would you rather have for a friend, Jonas or Asher? Why?
- Do you think The Giver would be a good grandfather? Why or why not?
- What does Gabe represent at the end of this book?
- How can Jonas’s father be so fond of children and still perform releases?