

A CONVERSATION

Suzanne Collins

Author of
The Hunger Games Trilogy

Questions & Answers

Q: You have said from the start that The Hunger Games story was intended as a trilogy. Did it actually end the way you planned it from the beginning?

A: Very much so. While I didn't know every detail, of course, the arc of the story from gladiator game, to revolution, to war, to the eventual outcome remained constant throughout the writing process.

Q: We understand you worked on the initial screenplay for a film to be based on The Hunger Games. What is the biggest difference between writing a novel and writing a screenplay?

A: There were several significant differences. Time, for starters. When you're adapting a novel into a two-hour movie you can't take everything with you. The story has to be condensed to fit the new form. Then there's the question of how best to take a book told in the first person and present tense and transform it into a satisfying dramatic experience. In the novel, you never leave Katniss for a second and are privy to all of her thoughts so you need a way to dramatize her inner world and to make it possible for other characters to exist outside of her company. Finally, there's the challenge of how to present the violence while still maintaining a PG-13 rating so that your core audience can view it. A lot of things are acceptable on a page that wouldn't be on a screen. But how certain moments are depicted will ultimately be in the director's hands.

Q: Are you able to consider future projects while working on The Hunger Games, or are you immersed in the world you are currently creating so fully that it is too difficult to think about new ideas?

A: I have a few seeds of ideas floating around in my head but—given that much of my focus is still on The Hunger Games—it will probably be awhile before one fully emerges and I can begin to develop it.

Q: The Hunger Games is an annual televised event in which one boy and one girl from each of the twelve districts is forced to participate in a fight-to-the-death on live TV. What do you think the appeal of reality television is—to both kids and adults?

A: Well, they're often set up as games and, like sporting events, there's an interest in seeing who wins. The contestants are usually unknown, which makes them relatable. 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.

Q: If you were forced to compete in the Hunger Games, what do you think your special skill would be?

A: Hiding. I'd be scaling those trees like Katniss and Rue. Since I was trained in sword-fighting, I guess my best hope would be to get hold of a rapier if there was one available. But the truth is I'd probably get about a four in Training.

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Q: You weave action, adventure, mythology, sci-fi, romance, and philosophy throughout *The Hunger Games*. What influenced the creation of *The Hunger Games*?

A: A significant influence would have to be the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The myth tells how in punishment for past deeds, Athens periodically had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete, where they were thrown in the Labyrinth and devoured by the monstrous Minotaur.

Even as a kid, I could appreciate how ruthless this was. Crete was sending a very clear message: “Mess with us and we’ll do something worse than kill you. We’ll kill your children.” And the thing is, it was allowed; the parents sat by powerless to stop it. Theseus, who was the son of the king, volunteered to go. I guess in her own way, Katniss is a futuristic Theseus.

In keeping with the classical roots, I send my tributes into an updated version of the Roman gladiator games, which entails a ruthless government forcing people to fight to the death as popular entertainment. The world of Panem, particularly the Capitol, is loaded with Roman references. Panem itself comes from the expression “Panem et Circenses” which translates into “Bread and Circuses.”

The audiences for both the Roman games and reality TV are almost characters in themselves. They can respond with great enthusiasm or play a role in your elimination.

I was channel surfing between reality TV programming and actual war coverage when Katniss’s story came to me. One night I’m sitting there flipping around and on one channel there’s a group of young people competing for, I don’t know, money maybe? And on the next, there’s a group of young people fighting an actual war. And I was tired, and the lines began to blur in this very unsettling way, and I thought of this story.

Q: The trilogy’s premise is very brutal, yet is handled so tastefully. Was this a difficult balance to achieve?

A: Yes, the death scenes are always hard to write. It’s difficult to put kids in violent situations—Gregor (the protagonist in *The Underland Chronicles*) is in a war, Katniss is in a gladiator game. Characters will die. It’s not fun to write, but I think if you can’t commit to really doing the idea, it’s probably better to work on another type of story.

Given that, you have to remember who you’re trying to reach with the book. I try and think of how I would tell a particularly difficult event to my own children. Exactly what details they need to know to really understand it, and what would be gratuitous.

Q: *The Hunger Games* tackles issues like severe poverty, starvation, oppression, and the effects of war among others. What drew you to such serious subject matter?

A: That was probably my dad’s influence. He was career Air Force, a military specialist, a historian, and a doctor of political science. When I was a kid, he was gone for a year in Viet Nam. It was very important to him that we understood about certain aspects of life. So, it wasn’t enough to visit a battlefield, we needed to know why the battle occurred, how it played out, and the consequences. Fortunately, he had a gift for presenting history as a fascinating story. He also seemed to have a good sense of exactly how much a child could handle, which is quite a bit.

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Q: What do you hope readers will come away with when they read *The Hunger Games*?

A: Questions about how elements of the book might be relevant in their own lives. And, if they're disturbing, what they might do about them.

Q: In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Gale have an extensive knowledge of hunting, foraging, wildlife, and survival techniques. What kinds of research did you do, if any?

A: Some things I knew from listening to my dad talking about his childhood. He grew up during the Depression. For his family, hunting was not a sport but a way to put meat on the table. He also knew a certain amount about edible plants. He'd go into the woods and gather all these wild mushrooms and bring them home and sauté them. My mom wouldn't let any of us go near them! But he'd eat them up and they never harmed him, so I guess he knew which ones were safe, because wild mushrooms can be very deadly.

I also read a big stack of wilderness survival guidebooks. And here's what I learned: you've got to be really good to survive out there for more than a few days.

Q: How long would it take for North America to deteriorate into the world depicted in the books?

A: You'd have to allow for the collapse of civilization as we know it, the emergence of Panem, a rebellion, and seventy-four years of the Hunger Games. We're talking triple digits.

Q: You have written for television for young children and for middle-grade readers (the *New York Times* bestselling series *The Underland Chronicles*). Why did you decide to write for an older audience and how was the experience different?

A: I think the nature of the story dictated the age of the audience from the beginning. Both *The Underland Chronicles* and *The Hunger Games* have a lot of violence. But in *The Underland Chronicles*, even though human characters die, a lot of the conflict takes place between different fantastical species. Giant rats and bats and things. You can skew a little younger that way. Whereas in *The Hunger Games*, there's no fantasy element, it's futuristic sci-fi and the violence is not only human on human, it's kid on kid. And I think that automatically moves you into an older age range.

I find there isn't a great deal of difference technically in how you approach a story, no matter what age it's for. I started out as a playwright for adult audiences. When television work came along, it was primarily for children. But whatever age you're writing for, the same rules of plot, character, and theme apply. You just set up a world and try to remain true to it. If it's filled with cuddly animated animals, chances are no one's going to die. If it's filled with giant flesh-and-blood rats with a grudge, there's going to be violence.

Q: What was it like to return to the world of the Hunger Games to write *Catching Fire* and then *Mockingjay*?

A: Honestly, I feel like I never left it. The revisions of Book I overlapped with the writing of Book II, just as Book II has overlapped with Book III. Since each book feeds into the next, I feel like part of my brain's been in Panem continuously.

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Q: Do you have every book completely mapped out, or do you have a general idea and then take it from there? Did you run into things that were unexpected plot-wise or character-wise?

A: I've learned it helps me to work out the key structural points before I begin a story. The inciting incident, acts, breaks, mid-story reversal, crisis, climax, those sorts of things. I'll know a lot of what fills the spaces between them as well, but I leave some uncharted room for the characters to develop. And if a door opens along the way, and I'm intrigued by where it leads, I'll definitely go through it.

Q: How do you typically spend your workday? Do you have a routine as you write?

A: I grab some cereal and sit down to work as soon as possible. The more distractions I have to deal with before I actually begin writing, the harder focusing on the story becomes. Then I work until I'm tapped out, usually sometime in the early afternoon. If I actually write three to five hours, that's a productive day. Some days all I do is stare at the wall. That can be productive, too, if you're working out character and plot problems. The rest of the time, I walk around with the story slipping in and out of my thoughts.

Q: You are probably getting a lot of fan mail! What is the most surprising feedback you've received for The Hunger Games? (Or, what has surprised you the most about the feedback you're getting for The Hunger Games.)

A: Probably how differently people view the book. Some are attracted to the dystopian world, others are there for action and adventure, still others for the romance. The readers are defining the book in very personal and exciting ways.

Q: What were some of your favorite novels when you were a teen?

A: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers
Nineteen Eighty Four by George Orwell
Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy
Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut
A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle
Lord of the Flies by William Golding
Boris by Jaap Haer
Germinal by Emile Zola
Dandelion Wine by Ray Bradbury

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