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INTRODUCTION

Like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* before it, *The Hunger Games* has become a phenomenon. It boasted the third-largest opening weekend in movie history, the largest ever to star a female lead (also the largest that wasn't a sequel, since *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2* and *The Dark Knight* were the others). Teachers are discussing the book in all levels of school. Blogs and articles crowd the internet. Etsy's bursting with cellphone covers, mockingjay lightbulbs, shirts, and jewelry. Even archery lessons are up. But most of all, teens and kids are devouring the books.

The series is getting kids reading, the same praise that *Harry Potter* earned. Like *Harry Potter*, the books offer something for everyone, from action-packed escapism to a far-off world with close, relatable characters. It's a survival action-adventure set in a creepy future with coming-of-age and romance thrown in the mix. There's a heroine's journey, a love triangle, a quest into the darkness of the soul. And unlike *Harry Potter*, the series stars a powerful olive-skinned girl who can outrun deer, keep her family alive, and outwit the highest levels of government. At last, a heroine who's far more than a love interest or sidekick has taken over pop culture.

David Levithan, editorial director at Scholastic, told the story of the book's first appearance at his company, noting, "We knew it was a crossover success because we were not only giving it to our kids, but we were also giving it to our parents and getting great responses from both, which was really the first inkling we had that it was gonna be huge for both teenagers and adults" ("Gamemaker").

The Hunger Games, at the time of this writing, has three more movies remaining. The first fan-based conference, Victory Tour 2013, is coming this summer. But there has already been an enormous body of scholarly and fannish work, in books, at pop culture and young adult literary conventions, and even at conventions for the competing franchises.

The term "competing" may be rather strong of course. 2012 marks the final *Twilight* movie, with the final *Harry Potter* a few years before. Both have

THE MANY FACES OF KATNISS EVERDEEN

mirrored *Hunger Games* in both the audience and the transmedia nature of the franchise: Fansites are exploding with art and fanfiction, with parody videos and cross-genre projects like “The Potter Games.” *Saturday Night Live* and *Mad Magazine* have tackled it, tribute Halloween costumes and mockingjay pins are everywhere. Video games have been popular, though criticized for the violent recreations of the arena. A quieter family-friendly boardgame reproduces the pre-Game training.

In fact, many parents are critical of violence in the series, so much so that it’s #3 in the ALA’s top ten banned books for 2012, above *To Kill a Mockingbird* as #10. (Other reasons for its banned status include the inaccurate to the point of puzzling “sexually explicit” and “satanic/occult.” In fact, there is no magic, witchcraft, devil worship or mention of these, and no romantic moments beyond kissing.) The series is violent, no question. However, many of those most offended haven’t read the series to understand it’s a *protest* of violence, not a book that praises it. Levithan adds:

We knew because Suzanne had written *The Underland Chronicles* that she wasn’t gonna be exploitative. We knew that the violence was there as a critique of violence and so because of that, what would’ve been scary subject matter in the hands of another author, we really trusted Suzanne to deal with it responsibly and we knew that if there was gonna be violence, there was gonna be violence for a reason. (“Gamemaker”)

Teen and child soldiers are not glorified in the series, but undergo trauma throughout the battles and long after, emphasizing the ultimate destructiveness of war today.

As the series reflects our world, from the wasteful luxury of the American lifestyle to the callousness, it cries out for social change. In a world of desensitization to violence, it’s a commentary on who we’re becoming as a people, and how other nations are growing to see us.

At the same time, the series offers deep historical references from Shakespeare’s plays and the time of Caesar: Characters Enobarria and Octavia hail from *Antony and Cleopatra*; Coriolanus Snow from his namesake play; and Brutus, Caesar Flickerman, Cato, Cinna, Claudius Templesmith, Flavius, Messalla, Portia, and Purnia from *Julius Caesar*. Collins saw Katniss as a modern day Theseus or Spartacus, the gladiator condemned to die in the Roman arena who finally led a revolution against the greedy Capitol.

It’s also a story about storytelling, as Katniss makes herself into the Mockingjay and sings of a better future. The movie adaptation, especially, has a subplot about Seneca Crane, the twisty-bearded Gamemakers who is executed for telling too good a story. But even as Haymitch protests that this is all just a television show, Collins reminds us that it’s far more.

Why is the trilogy such a success? Is it the nonstop first person immediacy?

EXPLORING THE HEROINE OF THE HUNGER GAMES

The serious themes? The glimpse of a horrific, yet all-too-possible future? All this and more. This book explores the many genres and messages covered by *The Hunger Games* series: That hunger is not a game, that a single courageous voice can topple a dictator. War is the ultimate evil, and the death of innocents the worst crime of all. By making us care about Katniss and her friends, Collins opens our eyes to today's most powerful issues. And that's the real power of *The Hunger Games* today.