



The Hunger Games Movie: First in an Exciting Trilogy

Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) has grown accustomed to oppression in District 12 of Panem, the post-apocalyptic remains of North America. Big Brother, which governs from the Capitol, has ensured that the people in the 12 districts that comprise Panem have just enough resources to survive, but no more than that, forcing Katniss to develop her own resourcefulness. Left without a father, who perished in a mine explosion, Katniss must take charge of her family, caring for both her mother and younger sister, as her mother retreats into her own world of misery, scarcely surfacing long enough to care for her children.



The history of Panem is a frightening one. What was once North America has succumbed to a number of disasters — ranging from droughts and storms to fires and brutal, unending wars — leaving in its wake just 13 districts, ruled by a “shining Capitol,” which was to assure peace and prosperity for its people. When it became clear that the Capitol was not fulfilling its utopian promises, however, the people in the districts rose up. All 13 districts were defeated, and one was obliterated altogether.

As punishment for the so-called “Dark Days” — the days of the uprising — the regime imposes the Hunger Games on the people of the remaining 12 districts through the Treaty of Treason. Once a year, each district is forced to provide one girl and one boy, between the ages of 12 and 18, picked at random. These young people, called the “Tributes,” are imprisoned in an outdoor arena where they are to fight each other to the death, using weapons and the land’s resources. The last Tribute left standing is the victor, and the district from which that Tribute comes is rewarded the following year with more resources than are typically rationed by the regime.

Both the novel and the film begin with the “Day of Reaping,” a term coined for the day of the year in which the Tributes are picked. Katniss is fairly certain that her younger sister Primrose (Willow Shields), whom Katniss adores more than anyone else, is safe from being selected, as she is just 12 and therefore her name has appeared in the selection jar only once. The number of times a child’s name appears in the jar depends on one’s age, and whether or not they are willing to enter their names more than once for increased rations. As protective as Katniss is of her sister, she would never permit her to enter her name additional times for more rations. Katniss has fully accepted the heavy burden of feeding her family, and dares not place that weight on her sister or her fragile mother.

When, despite the odds, Prim is chosen, Katniss courageously makes the sacrifice and takes her sister’s place as Tribute.

As if the realization that her life will likely end in a brutal death within the next few days was not difficult enough, Katniss is disconcerted to learn that her fellow Tribute from District 12 is none other than Peeta (Josh Hutcherson), a boy with whom Katniss has had a brief but complicated history. It will



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on March 24, 2012

be difficult for Katniss to set that aside and view Peeta as just another obstacle to be conquered in order to win the Hunger Games and return home to her family.

Katniss, though fully capable and impressive in her warrior-like ability to survive, must compete against some worthy contenders. And in some cases, she must decide whether her need to survive is enough to overcome her nurturing nature which seems to have no place in the Hunger Games.

Will Katniss be the victor and bring pride, as well as increased resources, to the people of District 12? That's for the readers and moviegoers to know, but for those on the fence, it's worth noting that both the novel and the film are well worth the time to find out.

Much of the excitement of *Hunger Games* rests in the games themselves, which comprise the second half of both novel and film. It is here where one facet of Katniss' heroism is clear. She evolves into a virtual warrior, with remarkable agility and resourcefulness, as well as prowess with bow and arrow.

But it is in the first half of the film — focusing on her mental challenges — where the strengths of Katniss are arguably best showcased. She is regularly faced with the seemingly unbearable burden of feeding her family, forced to sneak into the woods illegally to hunt for food in order to ensure her family's survival. And when she is first sent to the Capitol to train for the Hunger Games, she constantly struggles with her own desire to live and fulfill the promise she made to her sister to return home, versus her nurturing instinct to protect some of those whom she eventually must kill.

That is not to say that the emotional turmoil of Katniss is limited solely to the first half of the film. She often finds it difficult to define and understand her conflicting feelings toward her fellow Tributes, particularly when she attempts to reconcile her feelings with her equally mixed emotions toward her best friend, Gale, who waits for her at home. Likewise, despite her desire to remain steadfast and strong in the Hunger Games, aware that her every move is being recorded on camera for the people in the Capitol (and in the districts too) to watch, she occasionally succumbs to her basic human emotions.

Both the first and second half of the book and movie are equally engaging, and combined, they strike a balance of action and character development that leaves one with an incredible sense of satisfaction — and, in the case of this reviewer, who has read only the first book, a desire to move on to the next book in the series (*Catching Fire*).

Collins' story does an excellent job of capturing the essence of the total state. As already indicated, the name she chose for the futuristic dystopia in her tale is Panem. Why? Consider the Latin phrase “panem et circenses” (“bread and circuses”), which succinctly describes the ancient Roman welfare system and gladiatorial games intended to keep the masses content and entertained — as well as contained and subservient. In fact, “panem et circenses” is often used to describe a governmental system of distracting the public with diversions to address the immediate and shallow needs of the populace long enough so that they may not consider the oppressive public policies of the regime in power. And Collins' Panem does exactly that. The government provides just enough bread and food to sustain the district dwellers so that they are not desperate enough to rebel, but not so much that they no longer need their government.

And of course, there are the Hunger Games, where children-turned-gladiators from the districts kill each other for the supposed entertainment of the people, instead of the people rising up against the tyrants who snatch away their children and force them to destroy each other rather than their oppressors.

At the same time, the Capitol itself is a constant circus, an element of the novel that the film does an



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excellent job of portraying. The people of the Capitol live in a reality all their own, where excess is part of everyday life. The privileged few in the Capitol are so far removed from the harsh reality of life in the districts that they view the Hunger Games as a sort of Olympics, placing bets on the winner and partying throughout the course of the lethal games. They are convinced that despite the games' barbarism, the people who are forced to give up their children deserve what they get.

One need not be a genius to draw parallels between the governing regime of Panem and that of the United States, adding a frightening layer of depth to the film. One need not look past the [recent executive order](#) signed by President Obama to discover that our own federal government has a desire to control our resources, nor does one need to look past the recent congressional debate over subsidized birth control (let alone all of the other government promises to take care of us from cradle to grave), in order to understand that the government is always looking for the next distraction to keep the American people in the dark about its tyrannical and liberty-threatening measures.

The leap from novel to big screen is a seemingly easy one for *The Hunger Games* because the plot and character development virtually speak for themselves. And Jennifer Lawrence aptly depicts the depth of the plot as well as her character.

But *The Hunger Games* does more than entertain and sound a warning against totalitarianism. At least in book form, it apparently has the ability to bring families together. Karin Westman, an English professor at Kansas State University who teaches this series as well as others such as *Harry Potter*, contends that *The Hunger Games* as well as the rest of the books in the trilogy are "powerful for families to share because it relates to so many primal issues such as sibling loyalty and family survival."

The graphic and barbaric violence, against the dark backdrop of brutal tyranny that characterizes the film, should be a warning to parents to keep younger children at home for this film. Otherwise, I highly recommend that moviegoers see this film. It is an absolute thriller and fully engaging from beginning to end. It will have viewers rushing to read the book (or the next book in the series if you've already read the first one) and anticipating the next film installment.



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