

Teen hero: Life and death in The Hunger Games

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LOVE AND SACRIFICE: *Hunger Games* heroine Katniss Everdeen (played by Jennifer Lawrence in the film version) leads a rebellion. PHOTO BY MURRAY CLOSE. © 2012 LIONSGATE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Anyone who works with youth is at least dimly aware that teenagers have been gobbling up the novels in the Hunger Games trilogy, a futuristic fantasy by Suzanne Collins set in a postapocalyptic North America. The film version of the first volume in the series, *The Hunger Games*, released in March, is one of the most anticipated movies of the year for young adults. Tickets started selling more than a month in advance, and the movie trailer was featured during the Super Bowl.

Following its publication in 2008, *The Hunger Games* quickly became a *New York Times* best seller. Both the second volume, *Catching Fire* (2009), and the third, *Mockingjay* (2010), debuted at number one on every major best-seller list. The books

have won numerous awards in the categories of young adult fiction and fantasy writing. Noting the impact of Collins's books, *Time* magazine in 2010 named her one of "the world's most influential people."

The Hunger Games trilogy does not have overt Christian themes. Collins is inspired most obviously by classic quest narratives. Yet amid her hero's encounter with violence and war and struggles with love, she addresses issues of suffering and loss and shows how acts of sacrifice can transform families and societies. In the end, Collins offers a vision of a new world in which all people's stomachs are filled and their souls are enlivened.

The story opens in an America that has been destroyed, ecologically and culturally, by human sins. "The disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, [and] the brutal war" are the result of humanity's destructive behavior. Starvation is rampant. This chaos leads to the emergence of a powerful, militaristic and hedonistic country named Panem (the Latin word for bread). The novels recount the journey of a resourceful 16-year-old girl, Katniss Everdeen, who seeks to help her family and to restore freedom and justice to her society.

The Hunger Games are a nationally televised tournament in which each year one boy and one girl between the ages of 12 and 18 are selected from each district of Panem. The participants fight to the death until only one remains. When Katniss's sister, Primrose, is selected for the games, Katniss volunteers to take her place. As the tournament proceeds, Katniss defies the rules and manages to maneuver things so that she and a partner both end up as champions.

Catching Fire picks up the story with the couple's victory tour. The ruthless government fears that other people under its oppressive rule will follow the couple's example and defy the establishment. The book ends with Katniss and her allies unleashing a revolution against the corrupt rulers.

In *Mockingjay*, Katniss becomes the face of the rebellion. After many twists and turns, Katniss secures freedom for her people. Although Katniss experiences great personal loss, the Hunger Games are ended.

The story of oppression of the people of Panem recalls the story of the Hebrew slaves oppressed by their Egyptian overlords. In other respects, life in Panem, where "in return for full bellies and entertainment . . . people had given up their political

responsibilities and therefore their power," brings to mind life in the Roman Empire, which offered people bread and circuses in return for their allegiance. The Hunger Games are the new circuses, futuristic gladiator games.

Two characters in the trilogy have particular resonance with the biblical narratives. Katniss is an ordinary girl who desires neither power nor acclaim, but she is placed in an extraordinary time and situation. Like Moses and Jesus, Katniss ignores outside forces to stand up for people yearning for liberation. The name Moses means "one who is saved through water"; Katniss is named after a local water lily. Like Jesus, Katniss comes from a marginal region of her society, the Seam, where miners cut coal from the earth. Can anything good come from Nazareth—or from residents of the Seam?

Moses discovers his mission through a burning bush at the foot of a holy mountain. Jesus claims his identity at the waters of the Jordan River. Katniss finds her purpose in life through a random drawing called the reaping, in which Primrose is chosen for the Hunger Games. She offers her life to save her sister, and she goes on to sacrifice herself to save her friends and ultimately the whole civilization. Katniss has many skills, most of which are beyond her comprehension or the knowledge of others. She does not choose to be a hero; the task is chosen for her, and her response is, "Here am I."

The Pharaoh figure in the books is President Snow, who resides in luxury in the Capitol and stages the Hunger Games to maintain control over his world. He fears the unpretentious woman from the countryside, recognizing that Katniss has power and influence that could undermine the entire system. "Katniss Everdeen," he remarks, "the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem."

The main theme throughout all three novels is Katniss's struggle with love and sacrifice. Katniss received the nurturing love of her father, who was then lost in a mine accident. She loves her mother, who struggles with depression. Katniss also loves her community and the unspoiled nature beyond the fences. In all of these relationships, Katniss displays the steadfast faithfulness of *chesed* and the sacrificial love of agape, a love that sets the other ahead of one's own needs and concerns.

Throughout the three books, one character after another follows the example of Katniss and willingly places others ahead of themselves for the sake of the greater

good. Like the fire of Pentecost that burns to every corner of society, Katniss inspires others to follow her lead. The contrast between the values of Katniss and her followers and those of the rich and powerful in the Capitol is stark. Without the loving sacrifice of many persons, the Hunger Games cannot end.

The Hunger Games trilogy captures many of the experiences of young people, who routinely witness violence on television and who know about environmental abuses, the disconnection between political leaders and ordinary people, and the increasing divide between the rich and the poor. They are familiar with video games and reality television shows. The Hunger Games trilogy reflects these realities and explores them in a challenging way.

The trilogy also speaks to the passion of the young for heroic action and their longing to be able to change the direction of the world. The release of the movie offers a wonderful opportunity to explore these themes with young adults.