

Undaunted

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue



ATYPICAL: After a neurological test, Tris (Shailene Woodley, right) is told by the administrator that she does not fit into any single category and is therefore “divergent.” © 2014 SUMMIT ENTERTAINMENT, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Divergent is every adolescent’s dilemma magnified. Will Beatrice “Tris” Prior (Shailene Woodley) model her life on that of her parents or risk everything and strike out on her own? The core questions in this film are conventional: Who am I and where do I belong in the world? Yet Tris’s dilemma is universal, and *Divergent* illuminates an age-old question in a new setting.

The film is set in postapocalyptic Chicago in a society with the motto “faction before blood.” Each young person must make a public commitment to one of five factions that structure the society’s social life: Abnegation, Erudite, Dauntless, Amity, and Candor. Once made, the decision is irrevocable and determines the course of one’s life. Before they choose their factions, young people are given a neurological test that shows which faction best suits them.

When Tris takes the test, the woman administering it warns her to hide her results. “You’re different,” she tells Tris. “You don’t fit into a category. They can’t control you. They call it ‘divergent.’” Tris decides to join the Dauntless, which means leaving her parents, modest and self-effacing members of Abnegation who model modest dress and self-effacing values in service to society.

The job of the Dauntless faction is to protect society. In her new life Tris wears black, jumps on and off of trains, gets tattoos, and enjoys raucous fun. Boys and girls sleep in the same room. New initiates compete to see who will make the grade. The protagonist even gives herself a new name, changing a formal “Beatrice” to the daring “Tris.” She finds herself enjoying even the “decadence” of a hamburger—something unknown to her until now.

While the premise is fictional, Tris’s move from one world to another feels very familiar to anyone who has left home for a new life. Her transition from Abnegation to Dauntless is also like moving from the certainty of childhood faith to the restless questioning of adolescence. Abnegation modesty contrasts with Dauntless tattoos. Abnegation self-effacement contrasts with Dauntless competition. These contrasts could easily devolve into a too simple story about leaving a sheltered life behind, but Veronica Roth, the author of the book on which the film is based and a professed Christian, makes the ramifications of that move complex.

Divergent isn’t a story of rigidity versus freedom or prudishness versus fun. Abnegation and the Dauntless are more than they seem to be. The Dauntless, whose job is to protect society, are not very good at protecting themselves. And the selfless public face of Abnegation can mask family violence. Tris learns that both factions contain communal goodness as well as communal and individual evil. Neither of them is as simple or straightforward as the name implies.

Tris’s task is not to leave virtue behind in the name of freedom, but to integrate the virtue of her past life with the virtue of her new one. She does not reject her parents either. She maintains a relationship with them, and their continued loving guidance gives her the strength to live her new life.

Tris’s Dauntless trainer and love interest (Theo James) demonstrates Tris’s goal of integration with tattoos he keeps hidden from a world divided into factions. He shows her his back, which is marked with the symbols of all the factions, and says, “I don’t want to be just one thing. I can’t be. I want to be brave, and I want to be selfless, intelligent, and honest and kind. Well, I’m still working on kind.”