

The Hunger Games

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [May 2, 2012](#) issue



The Hunger Games, Gary Ross's film version of the first novel in Suzanne Collins's young adult sci-fi trilogy, is a predictable hit after the biggest opening weekend since ancient Rome staged gladiatorial combats. But that doesn't mean it's any good.

The story is set in Panem, a totalitarian society in a postapocalyptic North America. All the power is in the Capitol, which controls 12 outlying districts identified only by numbers. Nearly a century earlier the Capitol had to put down a rebellion; ever since, in recognition of the districts' fealty, each sends two adolescent "tributes"—one boy and one girl, chosen by lottery—to compete in the annual Hunger Games. This is a nationally televised event in which the single teen who survives the natural obstacles of the wild, the challenges artificially generated by the management of the games and the aggression of his or her competitors is proclaimed the victor.

The heroine is feisty, resourceful Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) from poverty-stricken District 12, who volunteers as a replacement when her fragile 12-year-old kid sister is chosen. Her male counterpart, Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson), is a

gentle boy of her age (both are 16) to whom she is indebted for a kindness he once showed her. Yet even if they manage to outwit the boys and girls from all the other districts, one of them will have to kill the other.

The opening images of poverty in District 12 are poignant, but they're the film's only evidence of sensitivity. Everything that follows is melodrama engineered to play on our most easily accessed emotions. How can an audience fail to be revved up by scenes of teenagers killing each other? The screenplay by Ross, Collins and Billy Ray makes it easy for us to pick sides by dividing the competitors into those who arrive stripped down to their basest instincts (bloodthirsty, merciless, even sadistic) and those few—Katniss and Peeta and little Rue (Amandla Stenberg)—who exhibit some fellow feeling.

Every one of the kids is trapped by the barbarism of the system, but the movie shows little sympathy for anyone except these three. Rue gravitates toward Katniss as a kind of older sister figure, and Katniss clearly sees her own sister in her. But the purpose of their bond is to wring tears out of us when, inevitably, Rue dies in Katniss's arms and Katniss pays homage to her on TV. This scene exhibits the most loathsome variety of emotional strong-arming.

The movie makes a pass at social criticism by calling up analogies to *Survivor*, *American Idol* and other contest-based reality shows, as well as with its treatment of the Capitol aristocrats and their outré fashions. But the first is obvious and superficial, and the second is pretty much on a level with the way 19th-century melodramas used to depict their mustache-twirling villains. Donald Sutherland, as the president, is the chief mustache twirler, with Wes Bentley right behind him as the director of the games.

The other actors, who at least have more to work with, fare better: Woody Harrelson as the District 12 kids' drunken mentor, Stanley Tucci as the games' fake-sincere master of ceremonies, Hutcherson and especially Lawrence. She suggests a spark of humanity. The movie doesn't.