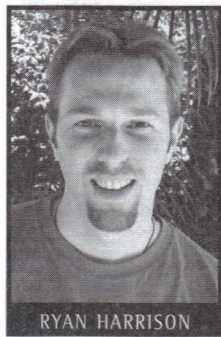


A reluctant hero

One of the few things I knew going in to see *The Hunger Games* was that it had stayed atypically close to its printed and bound beginnings. I also knew it was going to be violent. And that children were going to be the ones brutalizing each other. In fact, I had heard another



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film reviewer paint it in such stomach-turning colors that I anticipated emerging from the film feeling the need for spirit-cleansing baptism.

The worst of it came and it did cause some discomfort. I watched a few scenes through finger-slits or peripherally, having turned my head to soften the empathic blow. By the time the film was over, however, I didn't leave feeling nearly as depressed as expected. Nor as traumatized.

The Hunger Games tells the first part of a young woman's story, set in a post-apocalyptic and socially stratified civilization. Twelve "districts" are controlled by an affluent, technologically superior metropolis known as "The Capitol." Each year, two children (one male, one female) between the ages of 12 and 18 are selected by lottery to represent their districts in the Hunger Games, where the goal is simply to stay alive.

The main character is a young woman named Katniss (played by Jennifer Lawrence, nominated for best actress in the 2010 film *Winter's Bone*). At the start of the film, her younger sister's name is drawn, but Katniss offers herself in her sister's place. After being whisked away to The Capitol for training, Katniss learns that her only hope for survival lies in blending her hunting skills (hard-won through a life of stark poverty in what used to be the Appalachians) with the more subtle tactics of politics, popularity, and stage presence.

Long story short, she "wins" by surviving. Along the way, however, she is confronted by situations that reveal the nature of her character and allow the viewer to find some solace in her integrity. This interplay between Katniss and the terrible circumstances she endures is one of the places where I see value in this movie. The other stuff—the mediocre script and acting, the computer graphics, the portrayal of tomorrow's technology, the moments of frenzied

bloodshed—is less novel, less moving, and ultimately less meaningful for me.

My initial reaction was that *The Hunger Games* soundly rebukes the "reality entertainment" industry. Only, rather than doing so by portraying young people mesmerized into idiocy by watching others live out small lives on glowing screens, the film simply goes straight to the point and *kills* them.

It should come as no surprise that Katniss eventually rises up as something like a Christ-figure. She offers herself in place of her sister. She spends most of the time healing and nurturing others. She befriends a smaller, weaker, younger contestant. She sacrifices her own life to save a dying young man who, after hiding in the ground, arises a few days later. She even publicly honors her oppressed compatriots and demeans those sitting in sanctimonious power and authority over them. Sound familiar?

And yet the one thing about Katniss that I appreciate the most is that she did not *choose* to be the hero which, by the end of the film, she has become. Through a series of events that she did not seek, she continually reinvented herself. To me, it seemed she was persistently impelled to evaluate who she believed herself to be on a fundamental level, and then to act accordingly.

She didn't *want* to offer herself for the Hunger Games, but was compelled to do so out of love. She didn't *want* to become a publically favored contestant, but did due to her willful personality and strength of character. She didn't even *want* to humiliate The Capitol and its entertainment executives by expressing her willingness to die rather than kill a friend. These moments of truth arose—sometimes quickly and dangerously, and other times slowly and with help—and throughout the film, Katniss came out on the other side of each challenge stronger, if also more polarizing.

Watching *The Hunger Games* in this way is like watching a butterfly emerge from its cocoon, albeit a fiercely painful and perilous one. But perhaps that's the most stomach-settling way to think about it: as a story of a compassionate, brave, resilient hero-for-the-people, coming into her own. **M**

Ryan Harrison attends the La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren where he started and led monthly Spiritual Cinema Circle gatherings for more than five years. He now teaches "Spiritual Cinema" at the University of La Verne, and is currently pursuing a PsyD degree at the University of the Rockies.

ABOUT THE MOVIE

Title: *The Hunger Games*. **Theatrical release:** March 23, 2012. **Running time:** 142 minutes.

Director: Gary Ross. **Screenplay:** Gary Ross, Suzanne Collins, and Billy Ray; based on the novel by Suzanne Collins. **Produced by:** Nina Jacobson and Jon Kilik. **Released by:** Lionsgate. "Often (wrongfully) compared to the *Twilight* Saga, *The Hunger Games* and its subsequent sequels are a far cry from Meyer's angst-y teenage dramas," writes Diana S. Huang, in U.C. Riverside's *Highlander*. "Despite being geared toward young adult readers, Collins's fantasy world holds its own in the literary world by introducing a young hero who forges her own path and possesses uncanny survival instincts. The trilogy also deals with such relevant themes as oppression, war, self-preservation, and draws from mythological influences such as Theseus and the Minotaur."

