

## An Interview With Suzanne Collins

James Blasingame visited with Suzanne Collins at the 2008 National Council of Teachers of English Convention in San Antonio, Texas.

**James:** *The Hunger Games* is wildly popular with young readers (and older readers, too); in fact, today, it is the number four rated mystery thriller book for teens on amazon.com. Your career success originally came in writing for television, however. You worked on some wonderful shows for Nickelodeon, including more than one that was nominated for an Emmy Award, as well as the Christmas special, *Santa Baby!* (Rankin/Bass) and most recently, *Clifford's Puppy Days* (Scholastic Entertainment). You then turned to young adult fiction and wrote the *Overlander* series, which has won many of the top awards in fiction for young people, about a fantasy world under New York City. Did you grow up in New York?

**Suzanne:** Actually, I grew up all over the world. My father was in the military, and we lived on or near military bases, both in the United States, and overseas, as well. We lived in Brussels for quite a while. My father was also a professor at West Point Academy although he was actually Air Force; the U.S. Army borrowed him to teach for them. Among other things, he had a doctorate in political science and was a military historian. He also held positions with NATO and the Pentagon and for the Air Command and Staff and the Air War College as a teacher and lecturer, each of which meant a family move. He was a very intelligent man and was extremely knowledgeable and aware of what was happening around the world. He did his best to pass his understanding of history, politics, and world events on to

his children, and there is no doubt that we were influenced by his education and life experience.

**James:** That information could very well shed a lot of light on the setting and conflict of *The Hunger Games*. The brutal dictatorship of the Capitol over the 12 districts and the forms of social control and colonial oppression are always at the forefront of the story, with a thin veneer of popular culture from the present, such as reality TV, and professional sports championships. Did you intend for social and political commentary to be as important to the meaning of this book as they seem?

**Suzanne:** Yes. The sociopolitical overtones of *The Hunger Games* were very intentionally created to characterize current and past world events, including the use of hunger as a weapon to control populations. Tyrannical governments have also used the techniques of geographical containment of certain populations, as well as the nearly complete elimination of the rights of the individual. In the book, the annual Hunger Games themselves are a power tool used as a reminder of who is in charge and what will happen to citizens who don't capitulate.

**James:** Were any of your plot devices, conflicts, or characters inspired by archetypes from classical literature, mythology, or even popular culture?

**Suzanne:** Yes. The Hunger Games themselves, for example, were inspired by the story of Theseus, the mythical king of Athens, who slew the Minotaur, the horrible monster imprisoned in the Labyrinth, the gigantic maze designed by Daedalus. According to the myth, after subduing Athens militarily, King

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Minos of Crete accepted a peaceful settlement which included a regular tribute by which the Athenians would be reminded of their subjugation to Crete. Every nine years (when the full moon falls upon the equinox) seven Athenian boys and seven Athenian girls would be sent to Crete to be devoured by the Minotaur. As a young prince, the Athenian hero Theseus took the place of one of the young tributes, killed the Minotaur, and solved the puzzle of the maze. I appropriated the Greek mythological premise of a conquering power that bent all of its subjects to its will through violence and maintained fear and domination through a not so subtle reminder to the neighboring peoples that they are not free and autonomous (remember that District 13 essentially is a wasteland because the people there had tried to revolt against the Capitol and suffered gruesome consequences). My 24 boys and girls who must fight to the death for the entertainment of the Capitol are also called “tributes,” like the Athenian youth, and after taking the place of her sister, Prim, who would surely have died, the story’s heroine, Katniss, joins the other tributes but is continuously defiant of the Capitol.

I also drew upon one of my favorite movies, *Spartacus*, and the historical figure upon which the movie is based. Because Spartacus was a slave, he was never the direct subject of Roman writers, but his general story can be found in Plutarch’s work, *The Life of Crassus*. I researched not only the historical Spartacus and the popular media about him, but many of the historical

gladiators from pre-Christian times (before Rome started throwing Christians to the lions), and I found three things always present in the gladiator paradigm: (1) a ruthless government that (2) forces people to fight to the death and (3) uses these fights to the death as a form of popular entertainment.

The very moment when the idea came to me for *The Hunger Games*, however, happened one night when I was very tired and I was lying in bed channel surfing. I happened upon a reality program, recorded live, that pitted young people against each other for money. As I sleepily watched, the lines of reality started to blur for me, and the idea for the book emerged. Television news coverage of real events has played a very important role in my life. When our father was in Vietnam, our mother tried very hard to protect us from the television news, which at that time was much more graphic in illustrating the fate of our soldiers. Nevertheless, I saw it one day and was frightened and shocked to connect my father with this place, this war, where so many Americans were dying. I am fearful that today people see so many reality shows and dramas that when real news is on, its impact is completely lost on them.

**James:** Katniss is such a compelling character. She is self-reliant, loyal, and completely confident, even as she defies a tyrannical government. Will we be seeing more of her?

**Suzanne:** There will be two more books in the Hunger Games series; so, yes, you surely will.

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