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LENS 4: Reader-as-Writer

*The Hunger Games*

I knew Suzanne Collins was a master of suspenseful and engaging writing when I got to the last page of *The Hunger Games* and became furious that I didn’t have the next book of the trilogy immediately on-hand. I was starving for the rest of the story. I sped to the bookstore to buy the last books and flew through their pages over the next two days. I couldn’t stop reading as each book built upon the one before it, adding new elements and expanding to powers and conflicts beyond Katniss. So, this LENS is essentially written about the entire trilogy since I couldn’t even spare the time to write it before I devoured the other books. While I wouldn’t consider myself a creative writer, I wanted to investigate the reasons that Collins was able to keep me glued to her pages and attempt the “reader-as-writer” response.

I think the culprits are the first person point of view of a sympathetic yet strong female heroine and the extreme dystopia in which she lives. It is a good strategy to use first person point of view to keep the reader engaged. Reading only the details of what Katniss knows and sees maintains suspense and mystery yet allows the reader to draw their own conclusions and predictions—which they can find out later to have been right or wrong. Collins’ design of Katniss is also engaging since she is such a powerful and intelligent girl in the face of her extreme circumstances. As a reader, I had sympathy for Katniss but I would sometimes get frustrated with her thinking (admittedly, I was usually just annoyed at her doubts about Peeta…once I finished the trilogy, I gave Katniss a big “I told you so!”).

You could assume that to keep a book relevant and worth reading, it would have to be perfectly relatable but that is not the case with Collins’ novels. While the entirety of Panem is rather unthinkable in comparison to my own life, I was able to connect with Katniss over the more ‘real’ pieces of her life: her father’s death and her relationships with Prim, Gale, and Peeta. Actually, most of her characters were like that—half of their existence was totally unrealistic to me yet the other half was so real and accessible. It was that combination that made them so engaging.

The dystopian theme also kept me reading because it was unlike anything else I’d ever read. In Panem, a small percent of the population holds most of the power and exercises it with unforgivable violence and punishment. While that concept of power sounds rather familiar, the lengths to which the Capitol went to keep the Districts under control is outrageous. The life or death situations of their daily life are far beyond what the average American young adult would encounter—making the book even more attractive to those of us who enjoy reading fantasy. It was smart of Collins to continue this combination beyond her characters and into the entirety of the novel. It’s just familiar enough to connect to yet just fantastic enough to be thought provoking. I caught myself thinking “…but seriously…what if?” throughout the trilogy, wondering what I would do, how I could survive. I feel like a truly spectacular young adult novel should be addictive enough keep them reading and strengthen their skills. But it is just as important for the content of the story and memorable characters to make them think outside of the box and challenge them in new ways—not just read about something that’s so familiar that it doesn’t make them think about anything that’s actually quite abnormally plausible.