# A conversation

## Questions & Answers

**Suzanne Collins**

Author of
The Hunger Games

**Q: You weave action, adventure, mythology, sci-fi, romance, and philosophy throughout *The Hunger Games*. What influenced the creation of *The Hunger Games*?**

A: A significant influence would have to be the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The myth tells how in punishment for past deeds, Athens periodically had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete, where they were thrown in the Labyrinth and devoured by the monstrous Minotaur.

Even as a kid, I could appreciate how ruthless this was. Crete was sending a very clear message: "Mess with us and we'll do something worse than kill you. We'll kill your children." And the thing is, it was allowed; the parents sat by powerless to stop it. Theseus, who was the son of the king, volunteered to go. I guess in her own way, Katniss is a futuristic Theseus.

In keeping with the classical roots, I send my tributes into an updated version of the Roman gladiator games, which entails a ruthless government forcing people to fight to the death as popular entertainment. The world of Panem, particularly the Capitol, is loaded with Roman references. Panem itself comes from the expression "Panem et Circenses" which translates into "Bread and Circuses."

The audiences for both the Roman games and reality TV are almost characters in themselves. They can respond with great enthusiasm or play a role in your elimination.

I was channel surfing between reality TV programming and actual war coverage when Katniss's story came to me. One night I'm sitting there flipping around and on one channel there's a group of young people competing for, I don't know, money maybe? And on the next, there's a group of young people fighting an actual war. And I was tired, and the lines began to blur in this very unsettling way, and I thought of this story.

**Q: The Hunger Games is an annual televised event in which one boy and one girl from each of the twelve districts is forced to participate in a fight-to-the-death on live TV. What do you think the appeal of reality television is—to both kids and adults?**

A: Well, they're often set up as games and, like sporting events, there's an interest in seeing who wins. The contestants are usually unknown, which makes them relatable. Sometimes they have very talented people performing.

Then there's the voyeuristic thrill—watching people being humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffering physically—which I find very disturbing. There's also the potential for desensitizing the audience, so that when they see real tragedy playing out on, say, the news, it doesn't have the impact it should.

*-continued-*

**Q: The book's premise is very brutal, yet is handled so tastefully. Was this a difficult balance to achieve?**

A: Yes, the death scenes are always hard to write. It's difficult to put kids in violent situations—Gregor is in a war, Katniss is in a gladiator game. Characters will die. It's not fun to write, but I think if you can't commit to really doing the idea, it's probably better to work on another type of story.

Given that, you have to remember who you're trying to reach with the book. I try and think of how I would tell a particularly difficult event to my own children. Exactly what details they need to know to really understand it, and what would be gratuitous.

**Q: *The Hunger Games* tackles issues like severe poverty, starvation, oppression, and the effects of war among others. What drew you to such serious subject matter?**

A: That was probably my dad's influence. He was career Air Force, a military specialist, a historian, and a doctor of political science. When I was a kid, he was gone for a year in Viet Nam. It was very important to him that we understood about certain aspects of life. So, it wasn't enough to visit a battlefield, we needed to know why the battle occurred, how it played out, and the consequences. Fortunately, he had a gift for presenting history as a fascinating story. He also seemed to have a good sense of exactly how much a child could handle, which is quite a bit.

**Q: In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Gale have an extensive knowledge of hunting, foraging, wildlife, and survival techniques. What kinds of research did you do, if any?**

A: Some things I knew from listening to my dad talking about his childhood. He grew up during the Depression. For his family, hunting was not a sport but a way to put meat on the table. He also knew a certain amount about edible plants. He'd go into the woods and gather all these wild mushrooms and bring them home and sauté them. My mom wouldn't let any of us go near them! But he'd eat them up and they never harmed him, so I guess he knew which ones were safe, because wild mushrooms can be very deadly.

I also read a big stack of wilderness survival guidebooks. And here's what I learned: you've got to be really good to survive out there for more than a few days.

*-continued-*

**Q: You have written for television for young children and for middle-grade readers (the *New York Times* bestselling series The Underland Chronicles). Why did you decide to write for an older audience and how was the experience different?**

A: I think the nature of the story dictated the age of the audience from the beginning. Both The Underland Chronicles and *The Hunger Games* have a lot of violence. But in The Underland Chronicles, even though human characters die, a lot of the conflict takes place between different fantastical species. Giant rats and bats and things. You can skew a little younger that way. Whereas in *The Hunger Games*, there's no fantasy element, it's futuristic sci-fi and the violence is not only human on human, it's kid on kid. And I think that automatically moves you into an older age range.

I find there isn't a great deal of difference technically in how you approach a story, no matter what age it's for. I started out as a playwright for adult audiences. When television work came along, it was primarily for children. But whatever age you're writing for, the same rules of plot, character, and theme apply. You just set up a world and try to remain true to it. If it's filled with cuddly animated animals, chances are no one's going to die. If it's filled with giant flesh-and-blood rats with a grudge, there's going to be violence.

**Q: Was *The Hunger Games* always planned as a trilogy?**

A: Not necessarily. But once I'd thought through to the end of the first book, I realized that there was no way that the story was concluded. Katniss does something that would never go unpunished in her world. There would definitely be repercussions. And so the question of whether or not to continue with a series was answered for me.

**Q: How do you typically spend your workday? Do you have a routine as you write?**

A: I grab some cereal and sit down to work as soon as possible. The more distractions I have to deal with before I actually begin writing, the harder focusing on the story becomes. Then I work until I'm tapped out, usually sometime in the early afternoon. If I actually write three to five hours, that's a productive day. Some days all I do is stare at the wall. That can be productive, too, if you're working out character and plot problems. The rest of the time, I walk around with the story slipping in and out of my thoughts.

*-continued-*

**Q: What were some of your favorite novels when you were a teen?**

A: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith
*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers
*Nineteen Eighty Four* by George Orwell
*Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy
*Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut
*A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle
*Lord of the Flies* by William Golding
*Boris* by Jaapter Haar
*Germinal* by Emile Zola
*Dandelion Win*e by Ray Bradbury

**Q: What do you hope readers will come away with when they read this book?**

A: Questions about how elements of the book might be relevant in their own lives. And, if they're disturbing, what they might do about them.

**Contact: Sheila Marie Everett**
**(212) 389-3786 or severett@scholastic.com**

***This interview has been provided by Scholastic Inc.***
***It can be reprinted for publication either in full or excerpted as individual questions provided that they are reprinted in their entirety.***