

**The Trauma of Premature Exposure to Violence:
The Destruction of Innocence in the Hunger Games**

Riley Woody

Undergraduate Honors Thesis, University of Tennessee Knoxville

Dr. Randi Marie Addicott

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Abstract

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy was released from 2008-2010 and sat on *The New York Times* bestseller list for almost four years. In 2012, the first film adaptation was released, and three more movies would follow, bringing the fictional world even closer to reality. But while the gruesome nature of Collins' world garnered popularity as many readers deemed it entertaining, the violent imaginings presented to and formulated within the incompletely developed brains of teenagers suggest that gory entertainment might have consequences far beyond just the initial audience. As a didactic allegory on the damaging dissociations allowed by violence portrayed on television, *The Hunger Games* captures the pernicious nature of broadcasting death and destruction and labeling it entertainment. Collins intended that the trilogy improve society by enhancing the reader's understanding of the harmful effects of reality television and televised war footage. However, because of the incorrect selection of a primarily adolescent audience, she has more likely perpetuated if not worsened the preexisting issues by creating an opportunity for young readers to prematurely encounter violence; the consequent destruction of innocence thus damages experiential learning cognition, increases aggression and disables empathy.

Keywords: Trauma, Adolescents, Young Adult Dystopia, Violence, Innocence, *The Hunger Games*

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*Certainly there is no hunting like the hunting of man,
And those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it,
Never really care for anything else thereafter.*

- Ernest Hemingway, "On the Blue Water"

Introduction

Several dramatic and damaging events would define 2008 economically and socially for the United States, but for Gen Z, it mostly consisted of moving for Dad's new job or not going on vacation. There was no awareness of the violence we would soon encounter, but it had been published and was picking up speed to meet the waves of adolescents who would soon comprise its readership and its theater audience.

Suzanne Collins published the first installment in her trilogy, *The Hunger Games* (2008) and watched as it stayed on the *New York Times*' bestseller list for almost four years and became only the second book in history to remain the number one seller on *USA Today*'s bestseller list for 16 consecutive weeks (Scholastic). Following the release of the first movie in March 2012, Scholastic reported that more than 50 million copies of the original series had been sold. Film adaptations usually spur book sales, as movie trailers engage different audiences than bookstores, but there are numerous theories available to explain why exactly *The Hunger Games*, hereafter referred to by the abbreviation *THG*, experienced such popularity.

Collins' world, Panem, was bleak and cruel long before her 16-year-old narrator Katniss Everdeen was born. The narrative begins as Katniss sneaks out of town and beyond the electric fence to illegally hunt wild game, using the meat to provide for her younger sister and mother. Her father died in a mining disaster five years earlier, forcing Katniss to become the breadwinner and protector. The world around Katniss is oppressive and threatening, and the insidiousness of Panem's government, referred to as "the Capitol," is no more evident than during "the reaping."

The reaping ceremony always starts with a recitation of the country's history, one not at all unique to Collins' dystopia. The narrative that an oppressive regime—which paints itself as the species' benevolent savior—rises from the ashes after apocalypse is stereotypical in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction. YA dystopias distinguish themselves not by how humanity arrived at its futuristic state of suffering, but by what form that suffering takes and how it is somehow by the end of the series if not abolished at least abated because of the actions of a disgruntled teen.

Thus, *THG* captures the audience as Katniss explains that the Capitol is not secretly—but instead overtly—pernicious. There are no delusions among the 12 districts about the cruelty and evil intended by the Capitol and its leader, President Snow. After snuffing out an attempted coup from the original 13 districts (the 13th was obliterated during the conflict), the Capitol conceived a new torture: The Hunger Games.

The rules of the Hunger Games are simple. In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty-four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins. Taking the kids from our districts, forces them to kill one another while we watch—this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion. Whatever words they use the real message is clear. "Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen (*THG* 21).

The reaping is an annual lottery where the tributes will be chosen, names on slips of paper pulled out of a bowl and read aloud to the crowd of peers and parents. Each year between the ages of 12 and 17, a child's name is put into the bowl; once at 12, twice at 13, three times at 14, and so on. At 18, if they have escaped the horrors of having to kill or be killed on national television, they will officially enter the workforce, which in some districts, like Katniss' which specializes in mining, will be less traumatizing but just as treacherous. At 16, Katniss' name should be on five slips of paper; in actuality, she confesses that it is on 20, because along with compounding her chances every year, she collects tesserae, a system through which the Capitol provides resources to starving families in exchange for extra entries in the reaping. Katniss enters three additional times a year to gain the extra food rations for herself, mother and little sister, and this debt follows her every year, increasing her chances of being drawn as a tribute and killed in the arena.

Of course, as the nature of novels permits, Katniss is not selected, but rather is forced to volunteer, to save her 12-year-old sister whose name is inexplicably drawn as one in thousands. Katniss makes the ultimate sacrifice, and the reader is allowed a first-hand narration of just what fighting in a Hunger Games is like.

The nature of novels also permits allegorical criticism, and Suzanne Collins' is no stranger to the practice. In an interview concerning her inspiration for the abnormally popular series, Collins explained that she was channel surfing one night and watched as reality tv and war footage from Iraq began to bleed together ("Collins on Vietnam"). The overlay of these two media types, was meant to bring into question the ability of the viewer to dissociate, to justify in their own minds that the violence of war is far away, and yet those same individuals care deeply about reality tv stars whom they have never met but have tracked incessantly on their screens. To make the brutality of war into a reality television spectacle might still seem to hyperbolize

consumer cruelty, but Collins' also drew from the gory and gruesome gladiator games of ancient Rome, which act as evidence of the entertainment value humanity finds in suffering. It is the destruction of innocence which thus provides perhaps the most shocking element of Collins trilogy, as children are forced to kill or be killed. Her fascination with classical mythology, particularly the myth of Theseus, in which every year 14 children were thrown into the labyrinth to be eaten by the minotaur provided much of her inspiration for Panem. Collins recounts that even when she was little the cruelty to this story struck her because killing children was so much worse for their parents than having to die themselves ("Collins Part 1"), and thus Panem's Capitol also understood and implemented this Machiavellian strategy.

Collins' criticism of reality television stemmed from her own disturbance by it and the gruesomeness of war also communicated through technology. She explained that her desire for her readers was that "they think about what they watch in a more reflective way" ("Collins Part 6"). The violence of war conflated with the lack of reality in television consumption particularly concerned Collins as she explained,

We're so bombarded with imagery, and I worry that we're all getting a little desensitized to it. There's just too much of our lives that we're putting on television, and I think it's fine to get desensitized to a sitcom, but when you're watching real footage—actual tragedy unfolding before you—that's different. It is real life, and it isn't going to go away when the commercial break comes on ("Collins Part 3").

The conflation thus demonstrated by the reality television aspect of the Hunger Games as Katniss is groomed into Capitol standards of beauty and paraded around doing talk show interviews like any gameshow contestant communicates the desensitization of Capitol audiences. Katniss is a celebrity, and even as she fights for her life in the arena and becomes a murderer, the Capitol cheers and bets on her success, completely dissociated from the brutality of the contest and the

destruction of innocence enacted within. Collins intended that *THG* illuminate the propensity of the consumer to fictionalize death and suffering, even enjoying it at times. and even enjoy it.

However, this series, with all of its intentional disillusionment, unfortunately continued, and even deepened, the readerships' unwillingness or inability to see the harm of entertainment when centered around suffering. The popularity of this series instead demonstrates the consumer's hunger for violence; just as the Capitol residents jeer and cheer, readers and moviegoers hungered for more Hunger Games. But worse than repeating humanity's mistakes in ancient Rome, Collins created a source of gruesome and graphic entertainment specifically targeting *child* readers; the series was marketed as appropriate for readers aged twelve and up.

It may be in our nature, or it may not, to seek the suffering of others and find solace and excitement in it. However, it is not the nature of innocence to demand death, and thus stimulating a desire for not only the destruction of *life* but the malicious dismantling of innocence in the most innocent and impressionable segment of humanity is not only harmful to the child it traumatizes, but to the society they will one day construct.

The Violence of *THG*

Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do. – The Hunger Games, 202

Collins uses her books to spotlight the damages the entertainment industry has wrought on society. She encapsulates the issue of televising war and the subsequent ways the audience chooses to dissociate from things that disturb them. Reality television also proves damaging to those who spend too long under the magnifying, ever-watching camera. In her first Hunger Games, Katniss struggles to let down her guard when she knows there are cameras everywhere

waiting to show the world her feelings if she allows them to broadcast on her face. Yet, to survive, to manipulate the oblivious and pernicious crowd into sponsoring her life in the arena, she *must* reveal her humanity, wielding pathos and preying on audience attachment to her “character” to convince them to open their wallets and send life-saving gifts. These gifts allow the audience to grow in attachment to the entertainment, to engage with it in a way that satisfies their desire to taste the celebrity and feel influential in the outcome.

However, the violence of war and the strange, attached detachment of reality tv pale in comparison to the imagined horrors made possible by fiction. After all, both war and reality shows possess that element of truth: they are happening somewhere on our Earth, even if the angles are selective and the words are scripted. Fiction, in contrast, is restricted only by the imagination of the author and the extent of their vocabulary. If it can be fleshed out in their minds and written on the page, it can be conveyed to an audience in a book. Even the special effects in film can only accomplish so much in delivering horror or beauty, but the human brain can conjure and construct pictures that need only be written to be shared.

Collins, like many other young adult dystopian writers, seizes the opportunity to expound upon the violence and horror of death. As Alexander and Black put it, “The worlds they depict are cutthroat, greedy, and rabid” (233). Panem is the perfect example; there are millions of gruesome ways to die, courtesy of the Gamemakers whose job is to create as much spectacle in the killing as possible. The simultaneous use of the tributes as reality tv celebrities and sacrifices to “preserve the peace,” reveals that “Capitol culture is. . . aesthetically oriented but ethically shallow, still aiming to capitalize on deep human emotion and suffering by turning them into spectacle” (Guanio-Uluru 76). For Katniss, this means that as she avoids the other contestants by physically keeping her distance, she is eventually corralled toward her enemies by abnormally

aggressive, Gamemaker technology-enhanced fire; there will be no waiting out the violence or avoiding the trauma of this kill or be killed contest, lest the Capitol audience's blood lust be left unsatisfied or the outer districts forget the brutal totalitarian power exercised over their lives through the torture of their children.

If it is Collins' intention that her books encompass the violence of war so that her readership might better grasp the reality of its devastation, then violent content to a level of gravity rivaling that of war might seem logical as a rhetorical tactic. However, the gore depicted in *THG* has the ability to be more horrific than its proclaimed real-life counterpart because of its ability to be conceived of the imagination and remain unconstrained by possible outcomes in our physical world. The trilogy is meant to criticize the entertainment industry's capitalization on human suffering but ironically itself must *also* capitalize on the consumer's desire for said suffering. This is problematic because, "While the trilogy's declared purpose is to critique the misuse of power by a corrupt government who perpetuate their control through staging the slaughter of children as entertainment, the narrative can only make this critique through itself enacting the gladiatorial contest which is the Hunger Games" (Moffat and May 441). A critique through portrayal may *demonstrate* the eagerness for death, pain, and suffering in the audience, but it also consequently *encourages* further indulgence in such behavior as it provides a new opportunity for death as spectacle (Tate Ch. 6); it fails, substantially, to offer any solutions to the problem it points out, preferring instead to exacerbate. The allegorical criticism observed in *THG*, which is "clearly didactic" (Basu et al. 5), Moffat and May argue can still serve to justify the creation and circulation of the work because, "She does not hesitate to show 'onstage' deaths ... in order to accentuate the horror of the Games, but does so in a fairly

spare and factual way that does not sensationalize the events” (444). Unfortunately, this is not a truthful assessment of Collins’ language when describing the death of the tributes. When one particularly ruthless tribute dies after being stung by tracker jackers, a type of mutation (play-on words for mutation) which is a genetically modified animal enhanced to grotesquely kill whomever the Capitol might set them upon, Katniss (and Collins) describe the body,

Her features eradicated, her limbs three times their normal size. The Stinger lumps have begun to explode, spewing putrid green liquid around her. I have to break several of what used to be her fingers with a stone to free the bow. . . the flesh disintegrates in my hands. . . I dig my hands under Glimmer’s body, get ahold on what must be her rib cage, and force her onto her stomach. I can't help it, I'm hyperventilating now, the whole thing is so nightmarish. . . (*THG* 224).

The graphic description of just how terrible tracker jacker stings can be helps the reader comprehend the imagined terrors of fictional Panem and the sadistic attitudes of the Capitol, but the real-world equivalent meant to be criticized remains to be seen. As one popular meme expressed it, Harry Potter fans dream of Hogwarts, and Narnia fans dream of Narnia, but Hunger Games fans find themselves more content with their reality; there is no desire to enter a world so cruel as to actively celebrate annual child-gladiator games. As one popular meme expressed it, Harry Potter fans dream of Hogwarts, and Narnia fans dream of Narnia, but Hunger Games fans find themselves more content with reality; there is no desire to enter a world so cruel as to actively celebrate annual child-gladiator games. As one popular meme expressed it, Harry Potter fans dream of Hogwarts, and Narnia fans dream of Narnia, but Hunger Games fans find themselves more content with their reality; there is no desire to enter a world so cruel as to actively celebrate annual child-gladiator games.

The indulgence in descriptive language that will disgust or disturb the reader is not entirely overlooked in Moffat and May’s analysis as they acknowledge, “There are many moments of death in the trilogy, and some of these are particularly grotesque – such as Cato

being eaten by the mutant hounds or Mags burned by the poisonous fog – but most of these are presented as ‘bad deaths’...” intended, they argue, to remind the reader—as they remind Katniss—that the Capitol is the true enemy, not the children trapped in its game (444). However, just the concept of child gladiators, which Merritt et al. label as “quite frankly, bizarre,” (30) is enough to stimulate memorable and lasting criticism in the reader against the government. Clearly, the violent upheaval of Katniss’ life, which was barely survival even before the Games, evokes enough sympathy for readers to dislike the Capitol and see a need for change. Thus, the extensive and seemingly perpetual process of Cato’s death right before Katniss is declared victor, is excessive in its attempts to communicate just how painful and brutal an end he received by the Capitol’s design:

I don't know how long it has been, maybe an hour or so, when Cato hits the ground and we hear the mutts dragging him, dragging him back into the Cornucopia... the real nightmare is listening to Cato, moaning, begging, and finally just whimpering as the mutts work away at him. After a very short time, I don't care who he is or what he's done, all I want is for his suffering to end. . . No viewer could turn away from the show now. From the Gamemakers’ point of view, this is the final word in entertainment. It goes on and on and on and eventually completely consumes my mind, blocking out memories and hopes of tomorrow, erasing everything but the present, which I begin to believe will never change. There will never be anything but cold and fear and the agonized sounds of the boy dying in the horn... it takes a few moments to find Cato in the dim light, in the blood. Then the raw hunk of meat that used to be my enemy makes a sound, and I know where his mouth is. And I think the word he's trying to say is please. Pity, not vengeance sends my arrow flying into his skull (*THG* 394-8).

The actual physical torture of Cato, Katniss’ brutal enemy for the entire book, and her mental torture through the sounds of suffering, even as she acknowledges that this is *exactly* what the audience has been hoping for, can do nothing but sate the equally sadistic desires of Collins’ readership. The only alternative is that they be traumatized by the violence and gore read and imagined in their mind’s eye. Have readers then indulged in destroying their own innocence, or have they had it wrenched from them by the premature exposure to graphic violence wrought

upon the innocent for the pleasure of the already perverted Capitol? The reader would not debate that death is bad, or that the Capitol is evil. What then is the value rhetorically and societally of making that evil and death so much more devastating in literature meant for children?

Trauma in *THG*

Trauma is defined in Webster's as "an injury (such as a wound) to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent" or "a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury." This definition reveals just how vulnerable the human species is to trauma, because while it is first classified as physical harm, like the kind that sends the victim to the hospital, there is much more potential for that second and less obvious emotional trauma. It is harder to study hidden trauma because it is often buried in a person's personality under layers of sarcasm, defensiveness, or aggression. Yet, all of those protective layers are behavioral; they are expressed and therefore observable; they affect the other people in the traumatized person's life.

The most well-known manifestation of trauma is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the development of which is attributed to many factors including the circumstances of the event and the person, or people, involved. After her first Games, Katniss has nightmares which grow increasingly worse as she realizes that the horror of being hunted is not over:

Tongues feature prominently in my nightmares. First, I watch frozen and helpless while gloved hands carry out the bloody dissection in Darius's mouth. Then I'm at a party where everyone wears masks and someone with a flicking, wet tongue, who I suppose is Finnick, stalks me, but when he catches me and pulls off his mask, it's President Snow and his puffy lips are dripping with bloody saliva. Finally I'm back in the arena, my own tongue as dry as sandpaper, while I try to reach a pool of water that recedes every time I'm about to touch it (*Catching Fire* 221).

Each book has an arena for Katniss, her first Games initiating the nightmares, her second in the 75th, or Quarter Quell, which always tends to be somehow more gruesome than the annual

competition, intensifying them. But it is the third book, *Mockingjay*, that cements them. As Katniss works her way through the Capitol, she realizes that she is once again in an arena, combatting the Gamemakers who have laid “pods”—essentially—landmines of horrific ways to die. Katniss’ story ends in her epilogue, where she spells out how she will parent her own children, striving to help them understand what violence humanity can conceive, *without* traumatizing them. She explains to the reader, “We can make them understand in a way that will make them braver. But one day I’ll have to explain about my nightmares. Why they came. Why they won’t ever really go away” (*Mockingjay* 438). This is the nature of war-wrought PTSD; it is a permanent pain, and as Alexander and Black describe, “Katniss is steadily worn down over the course of the trilogy, having escaped death so many times but also having had to kill to do so, that she is essentially an empty shell of a person by the close of the final book,” (225). Katniss may have won in the eyes of the reader because she has managed to topple the innocence-sacrificing regime readers have been cheering against from page one, but Katniss herself is damaged in a way she acknowledges she cannot fix. That trauma is permanent for her; what is seen and done cannot be undone.

Collins portrayal of PTSD is thus very accurate and compelling to the right reader. If her goal was to raise awareness about the struggles of those in war and *after* war, then she has certainly succeeded. A study on the mental health ramifications of killing in combat found that “About half of Vietnam combat veterans reported taking the life of an enemy combatant and just under one third reported witnessing abusive violence, which included mistreatment of civilians, killing of prisoners, use of chemicals or bombs on villages, and mutilation of bodies. These rates are comparable to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF),” (Maguen et al, 435). The exposure to violence and prevalence of bodily threat in war is not news, but the same study more specifically

tied killing to PTSD, “After controlling for killing, the atrocities variable no longer predicted PTSD symptoms, suggesting that killing may be the potent ingredient in predicting PTSD,” (436). This suggests that it is not Katniss’ general memories of having to fight for her life that have so deeply ingrained themselves in her mind that even after twenty years she cannot manage to stem them. Instead, it is that she was forced to kill others that traumatized her so permanently. Another study found that of Vietnam veterans seeking assistance for diagnosed PTSD, 92% reported combat trauma of some kind (Teten et al. 828). Taking another life is the observed correlating factor in developing PTSD after war, but the extensive trauma generally experienced during war only worsens the condition, and most diagnosed with PTSD are struggling specifically with war-related memories.

Katniss epitomizes the struggle of combat veterans to process correctly and helpfully what they witnessed in war. However, there are greater implications for Katniss’ trauma because of her age when she entered the war and her level of involvement in violent conflict throughout the trilogy. *THG* opens with Katniss’ fifth reaping, meaning she is only sixteen when she volunteers to take her little sister’s place as District Twelve’s tribute in the 74th Hunger Games. The violence she then experiences should scar her more deeply for several reasons, starting with the fact that her brain is incredibly vulnerable to trauma. In examining brain maturation in adolescents, Arain et al. explains that “The brain undergoes a rewiring process that is not complete until approximately 25 years of age...” (451) which means that, “The adolescent brain is structurally and functionally vulnerable to environmental stress...” (458). Katniss is neurologically in the middle of physical maturation, and this both inhibits her ability to make reliable decisions under stress and increases the impact of the violence she witnesses, and in several cases enacts, in the arena. It is possible that Katniss, having become becoming the

primary provider for her family at only age 11 has further traumatized her in ways that she cannot afford to process. After all, “the adultification of youth is harsh for those whose brains have not fully matured...” (Arain et al., 456). Katniss’ rise to adulthood was forced and, at minimum, ten years too early. She was not neurologically equipped with the brain function she needed, not at 16, and certainly not at 11. It is no wonder that her character is coarse, rough around the edges and pessimistic. Her only gentle moments are saved for her little sister, whom she tries even with her life, to the point of death, to protect from the cruelties she herself has been overexposed to since her father died. Katniss’ trauma is enhanced because it is not just her body that is more vulnerable in the games, but her brain.

Considering the gruesome events Katniss both witnessed and, in some instances instigated, it is no surprise that she is traumatized and that her symptoms substantially impact her quality of life. However, as a child specifically, with an immature brain, Katniss does not exhibit as many symptomatic behaviors of PTSD as perhaps she should. As van der Kolk explains, “Childhood trauma is particularly significant because uncontrollable, terrifying experiences may have their most profound effects when the central nervous system and cognitive functions have not yet fully matured, leading to global impairment that may be manifested in adulthood in psychopathological conditions” (p. xii). The expected pathologies include PTSD, but they can also manifest in other ways, including emotional lability, increased expressions of anger, rage, and irritability especially toward peers, and “a reduced capacity to modulate feelings” (van der Kolk 14). They may even entirely isolate themselves, avoiding and even rejecting tenderness, affection, and nurturance from others (Armsworth and Holaday 52). While Katniss is very apparently distrusting of the people around her, she does not withdraw from her sister or mother, nor from her (while never officially labeled) boyfriend Peeta or her childhood friend Gale.

Katniss even as a child was not particularly interactive, so her intentional distancing and distrust of the people she encounters is not so easily tied to her traumatic memories of the arena. She does not exhibit any aggression towards the people around her, and the unwanted, subconscious memories of her time in combat are not shown in the text or the movies to surface very much when she is awake. Her dreams, naturally, serve to communicate that she is haunted, but they are not enough.

The question that should thus be asked of Collins: why choose to make Katniss 16 if she does not cognitively or socially operate as a 16-year-old. She was conditioned by her society and her circumstances when they gave her only two options: grow up instantly and assume adult responsibilities or die. The most obvious answer is that she must be 16, or somewhere between 12 and 18, to enter the child gladiator games in place of her sister. To have a character experience the traumatic events orchestrated by the author, she must be physically 16. This pollutes the illusion of trauma presented within the text, because as a political commentary, Collins brutalizes innocence by having children kill children, while her protagonist is only exhibiting characteristically *adult* responses to trauma. The trauma that accompanies destroying innocence is much deeper. As Armsworth and Holaday point out, “an awareness of the child’s stage of cognitive development is the core feature in understanding how the child has made sense of the traumatic experience,” (50). Thus, Katniss’ stage in cognitive development suggests that her vulnerability to trauma is so much higher than that of typical veterans, and yet the impact her experiences have on her behavior, even in the epilogue, does not match the expected level of affectedness. Perhaps, because Collins’ narrative is actually significantly more gruesome than the reality it is meant to critique, she chose not to accurately portray the damage done to her

protagonist because it. An accurate portrayal would accentuate the bizarre and grotesque hyperbole of her fiction.

Trauma of *THG*

The excessive violence coupled with the limitlessness of the human imagination, both in authors and in readers, forms the perfect combination for nightmares. Adult readers with fully formed prefrontal cortexes capable of judging for themselves the shortcomings of any fiction and, particularly the didactic kind, are not in as much danger of being traumatized by the vivid nightmares of Collins' trilogy. But the adolescent readership, who the books were primarily written for and marketed toward, are particularly vulnerable for the same reasons as Katniss. Arain et al. explains, "it is more difficult for teens to think through potential outcomes, understand the consequences of their decisions, or even use common sense," (455). Adolescent readers are neurologically lacking in some key areas for assessing and applying allegories that show up in their "reading-for-fun" materials. The white matter that "enables an individual to access a full array of analytical and creative strategies to respond to complex dilemmas" is still populating inside their brains (Arain et al. 454). An adolescent readership is not as capable of scrutinizing, either what they are reading or what the world around them truly looks like and how it needs to be changed. They cannot detect the didacticism nor, effectively discern whether or not they agree with the author or decide how they might want to express that agreement (through things like political involvement). Furthermore, if done in stressful environments, adolescents are not as likely to retain or successfully recall what they might learn because "high levels of cortisol, associated with stress, can damage neurons in the hippocampus," (Solomon and Heide 53). Unfortunately, the damage trauma can reap upon this region of the brain, responsible for memory, can stunt maturation in adolescents. A study on brains affected by trauma revealed that

“Changes in brain structure and physiology are thought to affect memory, learning, ability to regulate affect, social development, and even moral development,” (Solomon and Heide 53). This is very unfortunate news for Collins because the consequent stress caused by excessive violence within the series could not only fail to convict her chosen target audience of how the world must change but could actually damage their ability to see the need for change in the future; the excessive terror allowed when it need not be realized but simply put on a page and sold has actually worked against Collins’ intended purpose in writing an allegorical criticism.

It is important to note that Collins selected books as her delivery system for political commentary. Considering *THG* is a written medium, perhaps the analysis of childhood trauma and the behavioral issues noted do not apply to the nightmares induced by reading a particularly disturbing but still fictitious book series. However, the principles of Social Cognitive Theory suggest otherwise: “the central premise of SCT is that individuals learn through social influence in dynamic interactions through viewing the behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors performed by others in particular contexts including media,” (Mitchell et al. 323). SCT explains how people are influenced by their interactions with others as they bear witness. As a species, humanity has learned by observing, whether that be in real or fictional contexts. This process of observing, learning, and applying is part of identity construction. Cohen defines it as “a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (245). They empathize with the character so strongly, employing the “imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative and simulating that character’s thoughts, emotions, behaviors, goals, and traits as if they were one’s own” (Kaufman & Libby 1). Thus, the idea that young readers with underdeveloped brains might read the violence and determine it appropriate,

because otherwise why would they be allowed to read such things, is not unreasonable. As their prefrontal cortex and the skills in assessment and judgement it provides are not yet developed enough to aid in correctly storing and applying the implicit messages of Collins' trilogy, or any other dystopian novel, adolescent readers are not predisposed to accomplish in their own minds what she desired. If they can evaluate consequences by reading books and applying the "lessons" they observe the protagonist learning to their own lives, then they most certainly can emote with, to a damaging intensity, the terror, horror, and stress of that same protagonist.

The language describing how Katniss feels can thus be very damaging, because as the reader takes emotional cues from the author's selected vocabulary, they imagine things that would frighten them because Katniss is frightened. Readers, particularly young readers, have no trouble immersing themselves entirely in the worlds of their books. This happens through two processing behaviors, perceived realism and parasocial interactions. With perceived realism, "Readers often experience vivid mental images as they become absorbed into a book. With perceived realism, "Readers often experience vivid mental images as they become absorbed into/ a book. This is a phenomenon known as narrative transportation, which has been shown to elicit story-consistent beliefs and positive views of fictional characters" (Kokesh and Sternadori 143). The reader immerses themselves in the world of the book to the point of reality and then begins conflating the two when employing judgement. However, this becomes more problematic as "Perceived realism has been shown to mediate the effects of content on attitudes, as in a study in which viewers perceiving televised sexual narratives as realistic were found to be more likely to be influenced by them. Furthermore, research has suggested that the perceived realism of television content may make examples from television content more easily accessible in one's memory and thus more likely to influence social judgments" (Kokesh and Sternadori

144). The social judgements offered to impressionable adolescent readers are not always positive and—because of the vulnerable state of their prefrontal cortexes—can lead to permanent damage and inhibit maturation of neurological skills essential to functioning adults. One 14-year-old participant in Kokesh’s study said, “When I read books, it’s like I’m not just reading it, I’m in there with the characters. I can see what they’re seeing and hear what they’re saying” (152). The violence and trauma experienced by Katniss holds the potential to become too real for readers, particularly the target audience of adolescent readers. But while the violence becomes real, Katniss is not a good example of a traumatized child. Child readers who experience trauma by reading *THG* will have a much more adverse response because unlike Katniss, their brain structure is incomplete because of their age, and the damage done by stress and fear will have a much more drastic and permanent effect on their brains.

The consequences of live action portrayals of violence have been studied much more often than literary portrayals, and thus the ramifications of exposing vulnerable adolescent brains to violence through the screen have been measured and assessed to the point of exhaustion. Yet, because *THG* was also adapted for the screen and generated over \$14.5 billion over the release of four movies, it is important to analyze its potential affects as a film franchise and not just a book series (*The Numbers*). Mitchell et al. studied the relationship between sex and violence in movies viewed by children, and violent or promiscuous behavior exhibited afterward, and found that “Exposure to violent content was associated with increased aggression, which is also consistent with research on violence in television and movies that indicate short-term and long-term increases in aggression and violent behaviors in adolescent viewers during childhood as well as into adulthood” (328). There is also a demonstrated correlation between childhood exposure to violence and spousal abuse as an adult (Mitchell et al., 322). The violence in films viewed by

adolescents impacts their cognitive processing, which because it is in development, is particularly vulnerable to permanent changes and damages. Depending on how they perceive that violence, it can also traumatize younger viewers, whose understanding of the sometimes pernicious capabilities of other human beings was previously shallow if existent. The misconception is that film, because it provides the visual and auditory input for the consumer, is generally more traumatic because the material depicted can be more easily misconstrued by the brain and classified as physically threatening. However, because of the limitlessness of the human imagination, literature actually often holds a higher propensity to instill fear or create emotional distress.

When fleshing out an imagined concept on screen, there are limits both within developing that depiction and placed on the imagination of the viewer. First, in film adaptations of books, graphic artists work closely with the author and director to flesh out a character, creature, or place, based on the verbiage used in the books and the image the author had at the time they were writing. Designers work to align the image in their own heads with that of the author and subsequently deliver something close to what readers expect. For *THG* production director Philip Messina that task was particularly challenging because, “The way her books are written, some people think they’re very specific. But she writes in a way that really lets your imagination fill in the blanks” (Watercutter). Unfortunately, the process of imagination involves a lot of preexistent conceptions and associations; the reader’s memories affect the images they conjure, and that pollutes the author’s image, reshaping it into something unique to every reader. Without a physical artistic representation, the image in each reader’s head has no way to align with the author’s intention or even another reader’s conception. Film adaptations then ironically provide this avenue through which an entire audience can get on the same page about the appearance of a

creature or character. There are always those whose passion for the books keeps them from complying with the visual creation that ends up in the movies; some fans will insist that the character or creature in their head is better and more accurate, but that does not mean they can erase from memory the physical image now circulating in media. The most difficult task is fulfilling the fandoms' expectations of visual adaptation within the parameters of film production technology's current limits. Sue Rowe, who was the VFX supervisor on another, equally fantastic, apocalyptic book-to-film project called *The Maze Runner*, explained that she and designer James Jacob worked tirelessly to deliver a manifestation of the author James Dashner's "griever" while observing the laws of physics and anatomy to make their movements and mechanics (the monster was half lab-synthesized animal and half eight-legged machine) realistic and believable to the audience (Seymour). Real-life development of visual elements is limited to the capabilities of technology and the film's art team.

Once this image is created and released through the movie to an audience whose familiarity with the world of the books varies, the fear that image evokes is limited. Some viewers may find the image or event incredibly disturbing, the stuff of nightmares, while others deem it riveting and suspenseful entertainment. Those with an established tolerance for violence or other simulated stressors may even find it lacking in realism and disregard it as ridiculous. This is the benefit of the limited nature of visual manifestation; the concept now has one definition with set parameters witnessed by all who engage with the material. The uniqueness of the imagined picture is gone in a film adaptation. Not so in the books, though, as Collins encourages her readers to imagine horrors capable of becoming personal, particularly with adolescent readers who cannot anticipate the consequences of personalizing fictitious

experiences. Some of the images Collins' gives feel, as Messina explained, specific to the reader but actually very vague. Katniss is often found in perilous positions like the following,

My feet dangle in the air, no foothold anywhere. From 50 feet below, a vile stench hits my nose, like rotted corpses in the summer heat. Black forms crawl around in the shadows, silencing whoever fought survives the fall. A strangled cry comes from my throat no one is coming to help me I'm losing my grip on the icy ledge, when I see I'm only about 6 feet from the corner of the pod. I inch my hands along the edge, trying to walk out the terrifying sounds from below. When my hand straddled the corner, I swing my right boot up over the side. It catches on something, and I painstakingly drag myself up to street level. Panting, trembling, I crawl out and wrap my arm around a lamppost for an anchor, although the ground is perfectly flat (*Mockingjay* 386-7).

The suspense in this scene is tangible, as Collins employs a succinct vocabulary to help the reader emote with Katniss and understand the situation. Words like "vile stench," "rotted corpses," and "black forms crawling in shadows" communicate that whatever lies below is unseen but entirely understood as death. Katniss' strangled cry as the threat issues "terrifying sounds from below" communicates to any reader one essential element in imagining this scene: it is horrific. While the image of the monsters and the threats are based on what each individual reader has decided scares or disturbs them, fear remains the common sentiment among them all. With enough detail, and some real-life references to associate, a reader might manage to imagine what Collins' personally finds frightening. But Webster's explains that "monster" means "an animal of strange or terrifying shape, of abnormal form or structure," and "a threatening force." Monsters, particularly in fantastic fiction, by their very nature, do not exist in the real world, and thus can never be fleshed out enough to guarantee that all readers imagine roughly the same concept. Instead, it is the use of *fear* that aligns the readers no matter their background on the nature of a scene. Regardless of what that pit looked like, or what the creatures within looked like, one thing is certain: it was terrifying in the minds of readers because it was terrifying for Katniss. By emoting with the protagonist, adolescent readers especially, have secured for

themselves not a spectator's experience, but a comrade-in-arms' understanding of Panem's sinister character. The violence imagined is based on what makes each audience member afraid, not on whether the visual portrayal on a screen invokes in them the fear it created for a designer or author. If a visual representation of violence can advance normative views on violence in reality for adolescents, then how much more potential can the limitless nature of literary violence traumatize readers and consequently contribute to violent behavior in future?

Societal Consequences of Traumatized Children

After determining that *THG* is unjustifiably graphic material and that such violence can damage Collins' target audience, it is conclusively important to explore what societal ramifications can be anticipated in adolescent consumption of *THG*. Among adults, trauma affects mental health and therefore the individual's quality of life. Maguen et al. found that in Vietnam veterans trauma associated specifically with killing in combat correlated with the development of PTSD, peritraumatic dissociation, functional impairment, and violent behaviors (443). This damage results because "Traumatic events overwhelm the brain's capacity to process information. The episodic memory of the experience may be dysfunctionally (sic) stored ... Such unprocessed traumatic memories can cause cognitive and emotional looping, anxiety, PTSD, maladaptive coping strategies, depression, and many other psychological symptoms of distress" (Solomon and Heide, 54). Trauma is psychologically and neurologically harmful. However, when it interacts with a more vulnerable adolescent brain, it is even more damaging. Traumatized adolescents often reenact the trauma and, along with implementing their trauma upon peers, tend to exhibit generally increased aggression towards other children (Armsworth and Holoday 52). They also often withdraw from social interaction and nurturing relationships (Armsworth and Holoday 52), which at the very least stunts emotional growth and social

learning but can also decrease opportunities for Social Cognition Theory in which children learn to be cooperative and empathetic members of societal systems.

Empathy is especially intertwined with violence and trauma. Teten et al. found that, “In addition to alexithymia (the inability to express emotions), adolescent and adult aggressors display impaired empathy which is the ability to identify and discriminate emotions, take another’s perspective and respond to the perceived emotional experience” (825). They also found that empathic concern for the relational partner moderated verbally abusive behavior (Teten et al., 829). Thus, the presence or absence of empathy impacts expressions of anger towards others. Mitchell et al. argues that empathy should also regulate consumption of particularly violent material because empathetic viewers would find less enjoyment in the suffering of others (323). This explains why empathy seems to moderate exposure to violent entertainment, but it also suggests that empathy is negatively affected by trauma, particularly trauma that involved the harm of someone else. As an empathetic individual witnesses violence, they are disturbed; and to abate that discomfort, they must dissociate. Decreased empathy is a natural consequence of “peritraumatic dissociation which may also shut down or minimize feelings associated with the act of killing. This may set the stage for dissociation as a coping strategy, which interferes with trauma processing and paves the way for the development of PTSD” (Maguen, et al. 442). For individuals who feel responsible or at least complicit in the destruction of life, particularly when it is used for entertainment, attempts to disconnect from the surreal experience of killing are usually successful, but Solomon and Heide explain that dissociation can not only create but perpetuate PTSD as it keeps the traumatized individual from processing and reclassifying the harmful memories (54). Discarding empathy for the victim, regardless of situation, proves harmful for the witness. Furthermore, Armsworth and Holoday

observed that children use dissociation as a coping mechanism against feelings of overwhelming helplessness and terror (50). Both aggressor and victim experience trauma and are left struggling to process memories. Improperly stored, those memories resurface sporadically and trigger the physical and emotional responses to trauma like the screaming and sweating that accompany Katniss' nightmares. "Voluntary" exposure to traumatic violence can thus damage both the neurological development and the social skills of an adolescent readership.

Why is Exposure Voluntary?

If violence is traumatic and damaging, why then are audiences notably increasing their engagement with this content? Ames proposes that in the wake of 9/11, teens in particular are seeking a way to process the violence they witnessed and discern what their role in the world is in light of spectacular destruction (7). These fictitiously violent and traumatic narratives thus picked up momentum with a young target readership because "They present trauma in order to do away with it" (Ames 7). Unfortunately, while the generation that came of age with 9/11 did indeed witness violence as spectacle with death broadcast on every news station as the World Trade Center fell or the Challenger exploded, they were still witnessing the destruction of life, not innocence. The violence specifically created by Collins and depicted in *The Hunger Games* was vividly gruesome both on the page and on the screen. Thus, the trauma therein was not helpful in processing trauma within the reader, but rather, based on the research iterated above, created new trauma, much harder to see or understand, but no less real for the teenagers neurologically ill-equipped to anticipate, avoid, or process *THG*. Death as spectacle is not a new phenomenon; the Roman gladiators stand as undeniable evidence that humanity finds entertainment in suffering. However, once again it must be acknowledged that innocence, by the nature of being innocent, cannot and does not demand the destruction of innocents. For children

to kill other children, both the innocence of the victim and the innocence of the murderer are sacrificed. And for the entire narrative to be chiefly marketed at adolescents, the readership, too, is surrendering their innocence.

To prevent the continued traumatization of children, who not only suffer themselves, but or sustain significant damage too or lose entirely those parts of themselves that allow them to function successfully within and contribute positively to society, the individuals in their lives who *are* neurologically equipped to recognize *THG* as violent and traumatic must interfere. There is a social responsibility to the coming generation—and the world which they will construct and influence—to protect their vulnerable brains from excessively grotesque, didactic narratives on what the world is, is not, and should or should not be. If Collins truly intended that the generation that grew up reading her novels had empathy toward others and a consequent desire for change, she might have needed to reconsider her audience and the explicitly fantastic nature of the narrative she constructed, which does more damage because of its unprecedented violence than the original realities she intended to criticize.

Additionally, as *THG* relaunched the Young Adult Dystopian genre, other YA authors attempted to jump in on the action. A *New Yorker* article titled “Fresh Hell” explored just exactly what adolescents were so attracted to in Dystopian narratives and concluded that the situational parallel between protagonists whose worlds are getting worse by the day and are yet full of adults entirely unwilling to fight for themselves or their children is simply too similar to the perceived reality of middle and high school students. Miller explained that “(young adult dystopian) is not about persuading the reader to stop something terrible from happening—it’s about what’s happening, right this minute, in the stormy psyche of the adolescent reader.” With an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, teenagers regularly fail to connect their decisions with

consequences (Arain et al. 455), which then adversely affects how they relate to their parents, who often implement restrictions on behavior for “safety” reasons. This creates conflict between adolescents and their parents, because neurologically the former cannot rationalize the behaviors of the latter. However, Collins exacerbates this gap in understanding by villainizing adults. It is the adults who interview, who primp and preen and ooh and ahh at Katniss before she goes into the arena, and the adults who determine her survival and cheer for her gory end. The adults sit quietly as their children are taken away to die horrible deaths on national television at the hands of other children for the pleasure or torture of the adults who either beg for or plead against their imminent destruction. As Tate observes, “What kind of a world allowed people to let kids to live like this? ...it is part of a literary tradition in which adult authority is typically dangerous, despotic and deceitful” (106). Collins does not encourage her target readership to seek wise counsel but rather positions teenagers to further believe the adult world is against them and is at least apathetic if not predatory and malignant. This is not a good strategy when aiming to develop responsible young adults as “individuals with strong family ties are more likely to be capable of critical reflection about organized political institutions, because individuals who are family members before they are citizens are less susceptible to organized public indoctrination” (Atchison 269). Adolescents need adults who they can trust to act in their best interests and guide them truthfully through the thought processes and social responsibilities of a healthy and neurologically intact adult. By stoking the fires of division and distrust between underdeveloped and developed brains within what was intended to be a safe learning environment, Collins is working against her own expressed intentions to trigger analysis, criticism, and activism in the next generation.

Conclusion

The adolescent readership that was sucked into the Hunger Games frenzy are just now entering adulthood; therefore, not much data exists on how the entertainment materials made available to them as their brains matured have impacted their overall behavior within society as adults. Qualitative research is needed to evaluate the characteristically distinct behaviors of this generation and contributing factors like increased technological engagement, decreased in-person, social interactions, and higher levels of anxiety among teens and young adults must be accounted for before analyzing levels of violent media exposure between the ages of 12 and 25. Additional research might distinguish between written and visual media and the levels of cognitive inhibition observed when violence is delivered with and without defined visual boundaries. Yet, research examining the overall implications of adolescent exposure to and consumption of violent entertainment media is essential to understanding and improving societal practices for raising children to become analytical, active, and responsible adults who contribute to their societies. The demonstrated vulnerability of the adolescent brain, and the propensity of spectacular death to damage important cognitive functions suggests that deeper examination of the longitudinal effects of violent entertainment media will be worthwhile but also extensive. So much is still unknown about the consequences of premature exposure to violence, and while the psychology of the child is consistently analyzed in relation to real-world trauma, the need to also acknowledge and examine the fictional avenues of trauma is growing. The world is like the Capitol, full of threatening and malicious pods, but there is no way to know the consequences of triggering one until it is set in motion.

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