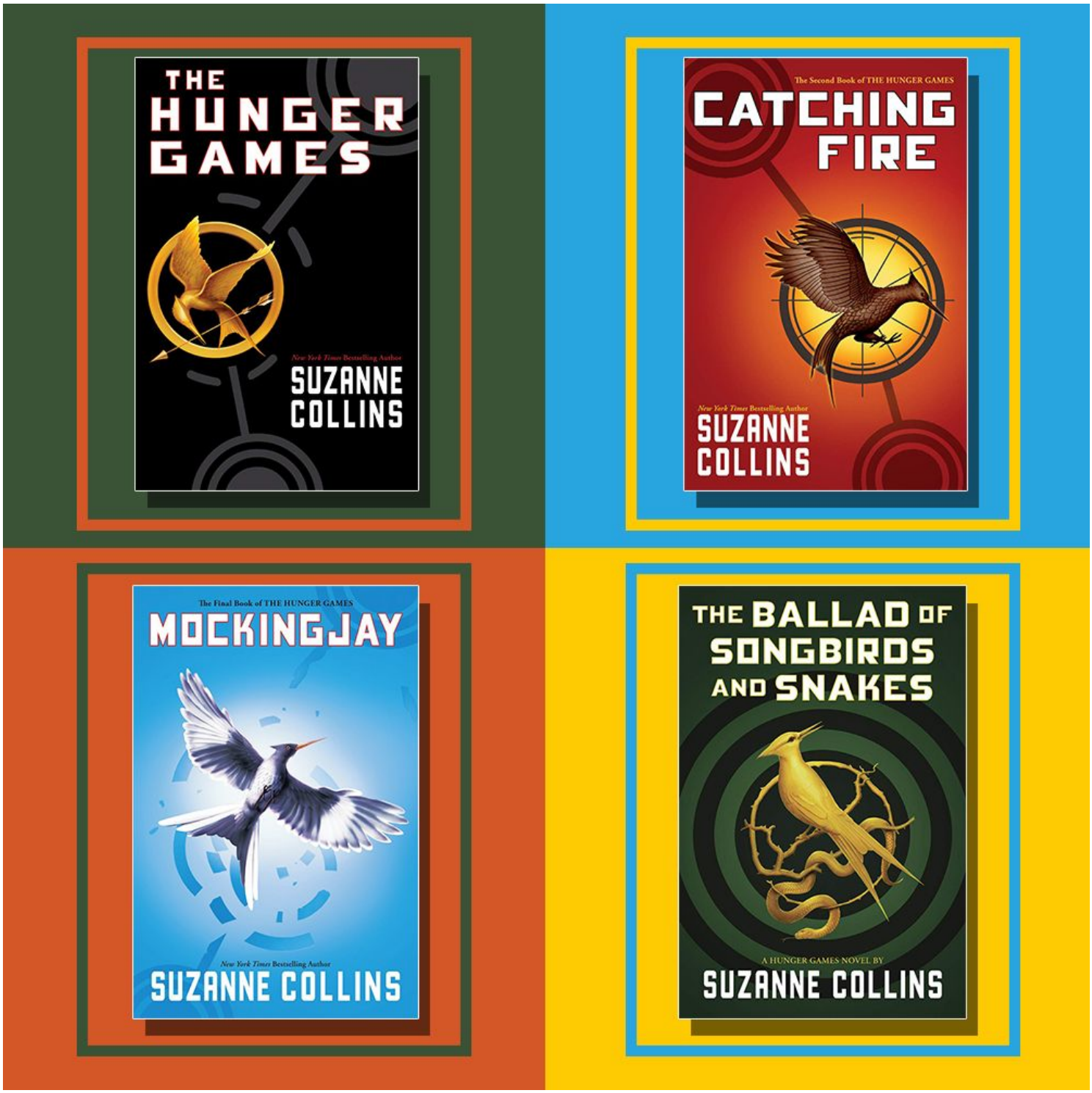
YA Authors Reflect on the Impact of Suzanne Collins' 'The Hunger Games'

As Collins readies the release of her "Hunger Games" prequel, "The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes," some of today's brightest young adult writers pay homage to the seminal author and her literary influence.

BY MADELEINE DELIEE PUBLISHED: MAY 15, 2020



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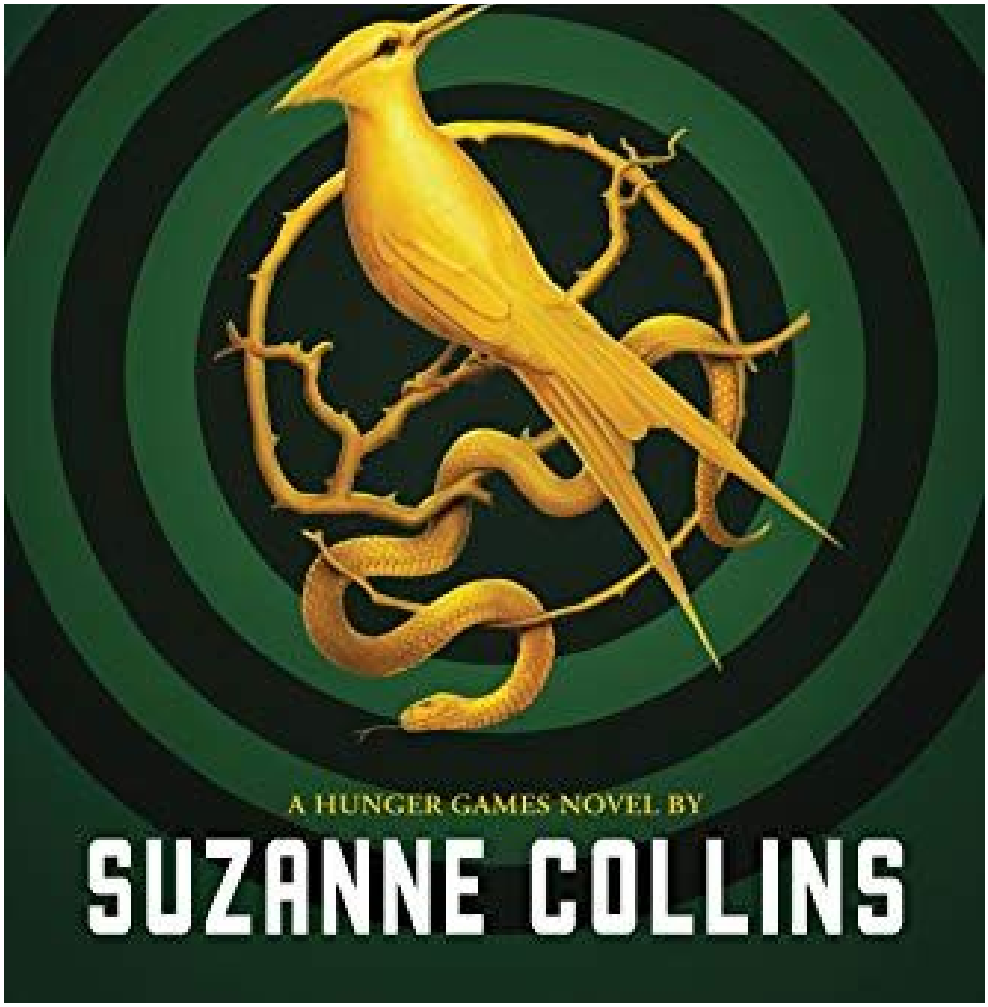
Twelve years ago, no one knew the name Katniss Everdeen, no one held up their fingers in a mockingjay salute, and no one went around wishing that "the odds be ever in your favor." That seems unbelievable now, given the impact *The Hunger Games* has had on our culture and, particularly, young adult literature. But, indeed, there was a time when none of it existed.

Fortunately, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* novels have become YA canon. The book series, and the subsequent movies starring Jennifer Lawrence, challenged our views of female protagonists, class structure, and political involvement — and did so through accessible, engaging stories that, while aimed at young readers, captivated nearly all of the literary world. *The Hunger Games* also cleared the way for a YA tsunami. Of the approximately 675 million books sold annually in the U.S., 80.9 million were juvenile fiction in the first six months of 2018 alone.

By their own merit, *The Hunger Games* books have sold over 100 million copies worldwide and are translated into 54 languages. The companion films have earned more than $3 billion. And now, the upcoming prequel, *The Ballad of Songbird and Snakes*, is set to release on May 19, continuing the story of dystopian Panem. As the unveiling of the title alone produced a wave of excitement at New York Comic Con last year, it's unsurprising that the first chapter excerpt in *Entertainment Weekly* raised the chatter further — particularly once the protagonist was revealed as Coriolanus Snow, described as "a teenager born to privilege but searching for something more, a far cry from the man we know he will become."

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (A Hunger Games Novel)





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Set decades in Panem's past, *The Ballad of Songbird and Snakes* follows an 18-year-old Snow — years before he becomes the nefarious President Snow — as he mentors a new mentee from District 12 before the 10th Hunger Games. Beyond that, not much more is known about where the story will go, but one thing is for sure: it will only serve to further highlight the influence of Collins and the *Hunger Games* franchise on the literary world.

Indeed, her work's impact speaks for itself. But, as *The Ballad of Songbird and Snakes* is set to be released, Shondaland wanted to put voice to just how prominent Collins has been in the YA genre. Thus, we gathered other young adult authors, who also happen to be enormous fans of her work, to weigh in on both what these books have achieved in the last decade and what they mean to them as both writers and readers.

Legitimizing YA

Harry Potter and *Twilight* helped lay the foundation for YA readership, but *The Hunger Games* moved it in a new direction: one that centered entirely on a young woman who propelled her own agenda. As Collins's editor, David Levithan, said in a recent interview, "Not many of us manage to write books that effectively challenge readers to question how they see the world and how they see their role within it. But that's exactly what Suzanne does." Not only did Collins subvert YA expectations; she led readers and future writers to look more closely as well.

Tara Sim, author of *Scavenge the Stars*, a YA gender-swapped retelling of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, points out that Collins' work "really rocked the boat." For her, it meant a swell of available YA lit that influenced her reading habits and, later, her own work. "I'm thankful to the series for putting YA even more on the map and kicking off my career, helping me achieve a lifelong dream," she says. *The Hunger*

Games was released in 2008; by 2012, YA sales had more than doubled over the previous decade.

Unlikely protagonists

Collins challenged our ideas of what a hero should be. Not only does a protagonist not need to be superhuman — she showed us it's better if they're not.

Katniss is kind of a pain; she is ornery and rebellious and reluctant to take on her role as the face of revolution in Panem, the fictional dystopian society in which *The Hunger Games* exists. And yet, Katniss prevails because of these very qualities — a far cry from the traditional Disney Princess mold. "She is everything that young girls are warned against becoming," says Leah Johnson, author of *You Should See Me in a Crown*, a book reviewed as "the queer prom romance you didn't know you needed." Johnson adds,"Katniss is everything I was warned against becoming. And she is exactly the kind of heroine I hope each of my leading ladies is."

Katniss's appeal is her flawed imperfection and realistic complexity: taciturn and caring; brave and frightened; fierce and soft. That multi-faceted nature "is the kind of tradition that I'm interested in writing into — one in which young women can be all things, and be all of those things to a fault," Johnson continues, "because that wholeness is at the heart of their greatness."

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A mural of Katniss Everdeen from "The Hunger Games" displayed during The Hunger Games: The Exhibition.
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And if this duality didn't prove the point, Collins took one step further, tearing at our established allegiances and making the trilogy's antagonist, President Snow, into the prequel's protagonist. Can she make us care about the bad guy? Abigail Hing Wen, author of *Loveboat, Taipei* — described as "*Crazy Rich Asians* meets a Jane Austen comedy of manners"— and a serious student of Collins's writing approach, can't wait to find out.

"*The Hunger Games* is one of my all-time favorite books and movies," she says. "I am so intrigued by the challenge Collins has taken on: turning a villain into a hero. I couldn't be more excited to read it."

Unflinching reflection

Collins speaks about finding inspiration for the books in the news coverage of the Iraq War, our detachment from suffering, and political struggle in general. As Peternelle van Arsdale, author of *The Cold Is in Her Bones*, a dark fantasy rooted in the Medusa myth, points out, speculative fiction draws on reality, directing our attention to the uncomfortable truths in our surroundings.

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“Margaret Atwood has often said [that] *The Handmaid’s Tale* wasn’t depicting anything that hadn’t already happened somewhere in the world,” van Arsdale says. “So that came across to me in *The Hunger Games* and was certainly inspiring to me.”

Collins’s willingness to include brutality also impacted van Arsdale’s writing. “I think it gave me permission to depict violence to the degree that it felt true and necessary for the story — not in a cartoonish or heroic fashion, but as a tragedy with real consequences in individual lives,” she says.

Nicky Drayden, author of *The Prey of Gods*, a South African-set YA novel combining fantasy and science fiction and an unlikely band of heroes, agrees that Collins’ stories serve a purpose that transcends simple entertainment; she sees them as an introduction to political awareness. “These books offer young readers safe access to the carefully curated dystopia America has been since its inception,” she says. “At the time, many probably viewed *The Hunger Games* series as escapism for young adults, but in hindsight, I see it as a primer for dealing with inequity and uncertainty, even before this current global crisis.”

Characters like Katniss Everdeen show teens they can be heroes, activists, and revolutionaries.

For today’s young readers, *The Hunger Games* narrative is an important entry point to understanding the world around them. “The books demonstrate that the world

doesn't really care about young people," Drayden says, citing the lack of response to school shootings, environmental crisis, health care inequality, and commonplace violence and poverty that today's young people are realizing is proof of a dispassionate society.

"However, characters like Katniss Everdeen show teens they can be heroes, activists, and revolutionaries, too," she says. "I'm thrilled to see them stepping up in the real world, now, when we need them the most."

Empowerment

The books' reflection of our world and its directive to take real action encouraged strength, particularly for female-identifying readers. Roshani Chokshi, author of *The Silvered Serpents* — a sequel melding fantasy, mythology, romance, and quest — sees power in Katniss's emotional scope. "What I love about *The Hunger Games* is its undercurrent of rage," she says. "Katniss is a girl of fire and fury. She never emerges unscathed from her battles, but her scars show how that battle was worth fighting. She's an eternal reminder to teenage girls that — if they are angry enough and determined enough — they can break the world around them."

Johnson agrees about the impact of promoting emotional, as well as physical, muscle. "*The Hunger Games* was nothing if not a blueprint for the mess of contradictions that is teenage girlhood, yet instead of invalidating those contradictions, making them trivial and small, Collins gave credence to them," she says. "She illustrated the inherent power of a girl who refuses to be boxed in, of a girl who — against all odds — wrenches her own liberation from the people who would rather she stay small and silent."

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at @MMDeliee.

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