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'Hunger Games: Catching Fire' is haunting but ripe for discussion

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NCR Today

In the months after "winning" the Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) and Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson) are back home, living with their families at the Victors' Village in District 12. Their mentor, Haymitch Abernathy (Woody Harrelson), has his own house there, too.

Katniss and Peeta are preparing to embark on their Victory Tour. Katniss meets with Gale Hawthorne (Liam Hemsworth), her soul mate who is now working in the mines and becoming more and more angry at what the people are forced to do to survive.

Haymitch is a drunken mess, and Katniss goes to the black market to buy some liquor to hold him over on the trip.

Not long before they are to depart, Katniss gets a surprise visit from President Snow (Donald Sutherland), who believes that when she and Peeta agreed to take their own lives by eating poisonous berries rather than kill one another, it was an act of subversion that gave the people hope. Now he demands that if Katniss wants to survive, she has to prove to him that she is really in love with Peeta and not just pretending to be. In this way, the president believes he can control the people in the districts.

Katniss learns of an uprising in District 8, and not long after, President Snow announces the Quarter Quell to mark the 75th anniversary of the Capitol's triumph over the districts' uprising. Two Hunger Games survivors from each district are to participate in a special competition to the death. Katniss and Haymitch are chosen from District 12, but Peeta volunteers to take Haymitch's place. Katniss makes Haymitch promise to do everything he can to save Peeta.

And so it begins again.

Revolt is evident wherever the Victory Tour train stops. The people raise their hands in salute to Katniss, using the symbol of the Mockingjay. By the time the train reaches the glitzy and glamorous Capitol of Panem, the stakes could not be higher. They are forced to be gladiators again, and their only thoughts are for their families.

If "The Hunger Games" was high school with adolescent characters, a year later, "Catching Fire" is full-fledged university grad school, where teenagers are suddenly adults with the burdens and responsibilities of conscience, choices and consequences.

A new character, Plutarch Heavensbee (Philip Seymour Hoffman), is the Gamemaker. His work, as supervised by President Snow, is to destroy Katniss and Peeta in treacherous ways during the Games. They cannot survive. Plutarch is slippery and conniving.

There are other new characters, but the bottom line is who understands what the real game is and who will make the right, good, selfless choices.

The action and violence are intense; the Games, cruel; and goodness, despite every attempt to squash it, cannot be suppressed. There are promises and betrayals, not least of which come from the people Katniss and Peeta trust the most.

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I keep thinking that "The Hunger Games" series, on film or in books, is really a social and moral parable for adults. It's *Lord of the Flies* and *Animal Farm* for the 21st century, and the peril is intensified by the maleficence of every inhuman regime that came before to enrich author Suzanne Collins' narrative vision. While I do not think the books are particularly well written, the elements Collins weaves together provide much fodder to compel the reader/viewer to engage his or her moral imagination when watching Collins' words fleshed out on the silver screen.

"The Hunger Games: Catching Fire" is about passion: the passion of love, the passion of power, and the passion of oppressed humanity that lives on hope, something President Snow understands but cannot allow to flourish.

The big question of "The Hunger Games" last year for Katniss and Peeta was: How do we not kill anyone? The question arising from this new scenario: How will we kill these people who are young, and one especially very old?

The fact is, they do not want to kill to survive but are put in an extreme moral situation that threatens everything. But as someone tells Katniss in the "festivities" leading up to the Quarter Quell: If you forgo your conscience, you can enjoy all the glitz and glamor of the Capitol as if nothing else mattered.

Hundreds of thousands of young people will see this film, as they did "The Hunger Games" last year. We all know by now that the story is not about kids killing other kids for sport but about the abuse of power that kills and hurts people and the inherent goodness in young people who want to save their families. My hope is that parents will see the film and let their kids talk about what it means with them. Kids of different ages do not interpret films in the same way, so it's good to listen to their views, hoping they will share them with you. Then you can add your perspective and values to make viewing "Catching Fire" a

meaningful experience that highlights what is right and wrong, good and bad, and what it means to be an authentic human being in family, community and society.

I was haunted for days afterward, especially by the darkness of the story and the heavy burden thrust upon Katniss. What will she do with it? I think we have to wait for "Mockingjay," the adaptation of the third book that will come out in two movies. We could argue if the film is as "good" as the book. I think "Catching Fire" reflects the book as much as last year's book and film. Lots to think about.

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