

# 9 Reasons to Get Fired up About *The Hunger Games*

By Elizabeth Baird Hardy

On March 23, theaters across the country will fill with viewers eager to see the cinematic adaptation of Suzanne Collins's bestselling dystopian novel *The Hunger Games*. Why, some might wonder, is there such interest, and why is it important to us in mountains of North Carolina? Whether you've barely heard of the *Hunger Games* or know it well, here are nine reasons (yes, nine, see number 5) why this book and movie matter here in the mountains.

**1. District 12 looks a lot like Carolina and it should.** The movie was filmed on location in western North Carolina, including some fantastic sites throughout the region. *The Hunger Games* is set in a future when what was once North America has become Panem, 12 districts controlled by the powerful, wealthy, and ruthless Capitol. For the scenes shot in the home of protagonist Katniss Everdeen, the coal-mining District 12, film makers selected the abandoned Henry River Mill village, a once-thriving textile town near Hildebran. Uninhabited for decades, the haunting collection of dilapidated houses and businesses made a wonderful backdrop for poverty-stricken District 12. Other District 12 scenes were shot in an unused lumber yard in Shelby. The sleek and shimmering Capitol was often created digitally or on soundstages, but the center of the novel takes place in the Arena, a vast outdoor space where two Tributes from each District strug-

gle to survive starvation, the elements, and each other. Our beautiful Carolina mountains made a wonderful arena, and filmgoers should look for the Asheville Reservoir and other breathtaking locations that will appear in the movie.

**2. North Carolina Has Talent.** Since the film was made here, local talent played a large role. While the stars and many of the production crew were brought in, western North Carolina residents served as the hordes of extras needed to people both the Capitol and the Districts. Avery High School student Jay Buchanan had an amazing experience with the film, from getting a severe District 12 haircut to meeting star Elizabeth Banks. While people with scars, amputations, and other distinctive appearances were used to depict the miners of District 12 or the farmers of District 11, other extras submitted to dramatic hair-dos and make-up in order to portray the fashion-obsessed residents of the Capitol. In order to create these very diverse looks, the film employed a troop of expert make-up artists, including Charlotte area make-up magician Conor McCullough, who won the first season of Syfy Channel's competition show *Face Off* on which he worked with the *Hunger Games* department head of make-up Ve Niell. Many of those who came to film here fell in love with the beautiful mountains despite the sweltering summer heat and challenged of filming outdoors.

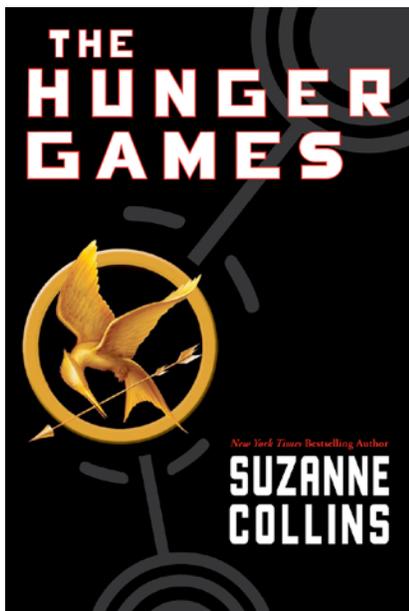
**3. Not just kids' stuff.** *The Hunger Games* already has a following of young fans who will doubtless scream at red carpet entrances, get Mockingjay tattoos, and otherwise display their obsession. However, their age, and the ages of the novel's protagonists, should not deceive the uninitiated into thinking this is a children's book. In fact, the violence and disturbing themes of the novel have made some parents challenge the book at libraries and schools. Like many other powerful works of literature with young characters, *The Hunger Games* is actually a very mature, sophisticated novel that will not disappoint older readers.

**4. There may be a quiz.** So appropriate is the novel for adult readers that it is being integrated into college curricula across the country. While some high schools are also using the book, the col-

lege courses are even more complex and thought provoking. At the Barrett Honors College at Arizona State University, for example, an entire *Hunger Games* course is being offered this semester. In addition to reading and analyzing the three novels—*The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*, students study the myriad of historic, philosophical, ethical, social, and psychological issues Collins raises. Closer to home, at our own Mayland Community College, I began using the novel in Expository Writing classes in 2010. The book has worked so well and been so warmly embraced by the students that other instructors have integrated it into their own classes. One day, as I walked down the hall, I saw three students sitting in the floor, all avidly reading their copies, but they weren't cramming for a test or discussion. They were all so entranced that they had to finish the story.

**5. Three is a Magic Number.** One of the reasons the novel is so popular with both students and general readers is its subtle and remarkable artistry. Suzanne Collins, a former television writer, knows how to keep her audience engaged, but she is also a careful artist who has imbued her riveting tale with complex structure and symbolic elements that many readers may never consciously notice. Among Collins's bag of tricks are her meticulous structuring of the novels around the number three. Each of the three books is divided into three sections, and each section has nine chapters. From the three-fingered salute given by the people of District 12 to the three main characters, triptychs are intentionally woven throughout the series, creating a powerful thematic element. Collins also carefully crafts *The Hunger Games* around the days of the week, setting specific events on specific days, though only once revealing the day, so that the reader must explore the symbolism. She also works with the symbolic associations of plants, animals, and colors to create a story that has just as much happening on deeper levels as it does on the surface. For example, Katniss, the resourceful archer, is named after a plant also known as "arrowhead."

**6. Not all fun and Games.** Though there will be action figures, board games, and T-shirts, this novel is not a mere



Left: *The Hunger Games* book cover / Right: Mayland Community College student Keith Nichols and his wife Tracy visit the "Mellark Bakery in District 12.

roller-coaster of action and excitement. In fact, Collins tackles some of the most crucial social and philosophical questions in her thought-provoking tale, which was partly inspired by a late-night channel surf during which she noticed the predominance of reality television and war coverage. Concerned by the way our world seeks entertainment in violence, Collins crafted her brilliant look at a potential future, in part, by looking to the past. She drew upon the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur as well as upon the history of Rome and our own Appalachia to create a world in which gladiatorial games, with actual deaths of children from conquered Districts, are the last word in entertainment. Though Panem is an extreme, of course, the novel unflinchingly demonstrates what happens to people and cultures that lose their humanity in their thirst for ever-more exciting forms of entertainment.

**7. Making a Difference.** While some readers and movie goers will only see the story as an action-packed thriller, many more have already sought opportunities to put into action Collins's reminders about humanity, charity, and awareness of the rest of the world. Determined not to become like the Capitol's beautiful, vapid, and cruel citizens, readers have been inspired to make lifestyle changes ranging from re-evaluating their entertainment choices to supporting charities. Canned food drives and hunger aware-

ness have been popular outlets for readers to show their concern and interest in making a difference in our real world. The casting agency responsible for providing the film's crowds of extras has hosted costume contests and acting workshops with canned goods as the price of admission. The movie will doubtless continue to inspire acts of kindness and awareness of those who already have lives little different from those in the Districts.

**8. There is more where that came from.** The success of the three books in the trilogy has inspired both readers and writers. Reluctant readers, many of whom were assigned the novel in school, have discovered a love for books. Often this interest in reading takes them to both the classics of dystopian literature, like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984*. New dystopian novels are also experiencing a boom, as are novels targeted toward a young adult audience. Like other popular novels that have appealed to both adults and teens, *The Hunger Games* has readers of all ages finding greater enjoyment in a book.

**9. One of the most important reasons we shouldn't ignore *The Hunger Games* here in the Carolina mountains** is that the story is, at its core, an Appalachian one. Though District 12 is clearly the coalfields of Southwest Virginia or West Virginia, the protagonists, their values, and their worldviews are all markedly influenced by Appala-

chian Culture. From Katniss's hunting and gathering animals and plants once commonly eaten by the people here to her insistence on not being "beholden" to anyone else, the novel's fiery heroine is an Appalachian character. The coal mining tragedy that kills her father and makes her a hunter is one that reflects the historical and current dangers of mining, just as the tragedies of war, deprivation, and oppression mirror some of the darker moments in our region's past. District 12, despite the beauty of its mountains and the resilience of its resourceful citizens, is treated as the least prestigious, least promising region of Collins's Panem. Yet it is from this area that Katniss emerges to inspire the rebellion and change that eventually lead to a better, more equitable future. Though Appalachia is still often misrepresented by television and movies, our beautiful, bountiful landscape and our strong, remarkable people continue to defy those stereotypes. Like Katniss, Appalachia is more than it seems, and if Collins inspires readers, and now film-goers, to learn more about our amazing region, then she has hit the bulls eye, just like Katniss.

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