***The Hunger Games* and Reality Television**

Suzanne Collins says she got the idea for The Hunger Games while watching television.  She was switching back and forth between news about the war in Iraq, and reality shows.  One moment she would see images of explosions, gun fire, and carnage, and the next moment she would see people competing to remain in a fraternity-like house with their every movement documented by cameras.  This juxtaposition triggered the idea that blossomed into The Hunger Games, a story about a 16-year-old girl forced to fight to the death against other teens in a vast outdoor arena, while the rest of the country watches on television.  Collins' novel poignantly comments on our current fascination with so-called "reality," and our enduring fascination with violence.

The first major reality-television show, and perhaps the one most related to The Hunger Games, is called Survivor.  It is a show featuring a crew of "real people," castaway in a remote location, where they must survive and compete with each other.  The survivors face many physical challenges - lack of food, gruelling competitions for creature comforts, etc. - but the most competitive aspect of the game is its elimination process.  Every week, the survivors gather together and vote one member out of camp.  The last person left is the winning survivor and receives $1,000,000.  The parallels to The Hunger Games are several and obvious.  In The Hunger Games, Tributes must also survive in a harsh environment and are forced to compete against each other much like the people on Survivor, but instead of eliminating competition by voting them out of camp, the Tributes must fight to the death until only one remains.  The winner gets a house, a monthly stipend, and is essentially set for life.

The Hunger Games also shares some similarities with other reality television shows, but the most compelling similarity, and perhaps the one Suzanne Collins most wants to draw attention to, is the way in which the audience watches and experiences the shows.  In The Hunger Games, the audience consists of people from the Capitol, for whom the Games are prime-time must-see TV, and the rest of Panem, who are forced to watch the brutal games.  The Capitolers are at best blissfully ignorant, and at worst callously uncaring, about the plight of the Tributes, who are teenagers reaped from impoverished Districts, forced to participate in blood sport for the entertainment of their wealthy oppressors.  The Capitol audience shows the same detached, voyeuristic qualities seen in people who delight in the cruel pitfalls of our society's reality television.  Real-life audiences root for and against all kinds of people on television - people with eating disorders, people battling obesity, addiction, and mental health disorders.  We watch these people as though they aren't real, as though their suffering doesn't matter.

This detached voyeuristic viewing is what allows the Capitolers to revel in the real-life suffering of the Tributes in The Hunger Games.  Because they do not truly recognize the participants as real people, the audience is able to experience The Hunger Games as pure entertainment.  The same is largely true for today's reality-television audience.  It is easy to forget that the people we see on TV are just as fragile, as insecure, as real as the rest of us.  While reading Suzanne Collins' The Hunger Games, students should compare the games and its context in Panem to our own reality television.  The similarities might surprise them.

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