

YOUNG ADULT

# Constant Craving

By GABRIELLE ZEVIN

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## **CATCHING FIRE**

By Suzanne Collins

391 pp. Scholastic Press/Scholastic. \$17.99. (Ages 12 and up)

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Series sell. Call it a trilogy, smack a number on it, pump out the books at the rate of one a year. Novelists everywhere lament the diminished prospects for the proper, stand-alone novel, though this is a whole lot of foolishness. If anything, the ascendancy of the series should be encouraging. In this oppressive Twitter-verse, we, or our children at least, still embrace the long form.

The problem is, most series aren't all that good. Sometimes the first book is engaging enough, but the volumes that follow seem like "The Continuing Adventures of So-and-So in a Quest for No Particular Reason Other Than to Make Money." Characters who seemed so full of promise in Book 1 haven't advanced an inch by Book 13. By then, it's hard to remember what the initial attraction was anyway.

"The Hunger Games," the best-selling first book in Suzanne Collins's planned trilogy, has a plot you think you've already heard. Two teenagers from each state of a totalitarian dystopia called Panem (America after an environmental apocalypse) are selected at random to participate in a reality show known as the Hunger Games. Having killed everyone else in the arena or watched them die, including his or her own teammate, the victor is celebrated as a hero and receives food for life. The novel follows Katniss Everdeen, the "tribute" from District 12. And now, I'm about to spoil the ending for you. . . . Katniss wins. It's the first in a trilogy, after all.

By the way, I really liked "The Hunger Games." But I love the new book, "Catching Fire."

"Catching Fire" begins with Katniss in the aftermath of her victory. With the calculated rebelliousness of her performance in the Games, she angered the leaders in the Capitol. So instead of enjoying semi-retirement, celebrity and all that free food, Katniss is drawn back into the arena. In addition to the continuing story of the girl in the ring, "Catching Fire" is a portrait of how a desperate government tries to hold off a revolutionary tide and as such has something of the epic feeling of Orwell to it. (But for kids.)

Collins has done that rare thing. She has written a sequel that improves upon the first book. As a reader, I felt excited and even hopeful: could it be that this series and its characters were actually going somewhere?

It certainly helps that at the heart of this exotic world is a very real girl, the kind lacking even a single supernatural gift. (Those “real” types seem to be in short supply in children’s books lately.) Katniss is good with a bow and arrow, not because she was born that way or struck by lightning, but because she was poor and hunted to survive (i.e., practice).

In a memorable scene from the first book, Katniss is forced to exhibit her hard-earned archery skills before a panel of distracted Gamemakers more interested in the pig being served for dinner. Tired of being “upstaged by a dead pig,” she sends an arrow straight through the apple in its mouth. A bold move, but not a terribly well-thought-out one. Katniss is essentially a kid throwing a tantrum. When she revisits the Gamemakers in “Catching Fire,” she uses the moment far more deliberately: to draw fire away from her teammate and break through the veneer of the people who “find amusing ways to kill us.”

Katniss is more sophisticated in this book, and her observations are more acute. We see this when she notices how much more difficult it is to kill people once you know them, or when she observes the decadent (and for the reader perhaps uncomfortably familiar) citizens of the Capitol gorging and then taking pills to make themselves vomit, or with her gradual realization that she may just stand for something greater than herself. All this is accomplished with the light touch of a writer who truly understands writing for young people: the pacing is brisk and the message tucked below the surface.

Incidentally, just because this book is intended for a young audience doesn’t mean that Collins isn’t delightfully ruthless. This is a world in which bad things happen to good characters. Right before her return to the arena, Katniss is made to watch as a beloved adult character is beaten and dragged away. At that moment, Panem feels like a place where anything might happen, and where a reader will want to return to see what happens next.

*Gabrielle Zevin is the author of the young adult novel “Elsewhere.” Her fourth novel, “The Hole We’re In,” is for adults and will be out next March.*