

## Dystopian Novels and the Potential for Change

There has been an explosion of interest in dystopian literature over the last few years especially those written with the young adult audience in mind. The popularity of *The Hunger Games*, first published in 2008, is a prime example of this genre taking the literary world by storm. It is not surprising that teens would be drawn to story-lines that focus on the future and that address their anxieties about issues such as global warming, scarce resources, abuses of technology, or controlling political regimes. The theme of rebellion so prevalent in dystopian literature, and a hallmark of the teenage years, also explain the attraction of this genre to the young adult reader. By examining two early examples of this genre of literature, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry published in 1993 and *Among the Hidden* by Margaret Peterson Haddix published in 1998, readers can see how these works paved the way for the more recent dystopian novels by presenting teenage protagonists living in controlled societies motivated to change their circumstances. *The Giver* and *Among the Hidden* feature similarities in characters, elements of control, and plot, but there is a distinctive difference in mood as expressed by each novel's unique ending.

The main characters of both *The Giver* and *Among the Hidden* are young boys who become aware of their distinctive place in their society and meet up with strong individuals who will forever change the course of their lives. In *The Giver*, Jonas can "see beyond," and it is partly for this reason that he is selected to be trained as the Receiver for all of the Community's seemingly lost memories. He forms a close alliance with the current memory-keeper, a wise

elderly man referred to as the Giver. Not only does the Giver transmit memories to Jonas, but helps Jonas see his responsibility to the Community. Once Jonas becomes aware of the dark truth of "release," the Giver also helps Jonas see his responsibility to himself and encourages him to leave the Community.

Similar to Jonas is Lucas, the main character of *Among the Hidden*. The two boys are about the same age. Like Jonas, Lucas lives what he thinks is an acceptable life with his family until he meets up with someone who opens his eyes to the wider world. When Lucas, a shadow child forced to hide because he is the third offspring born in a society in which only two children are allowed, encounters Jen, also a shadow child, everything changes. Like the Giver, Jen provides Lucas with knowledge about the outside world. Whereas the Giver has gained most of his wisdom through his own experiences and his training as a receiver, he is also a reader of books. When Jonas first sees the Giver's room he notes "But the most conspicuous difference was the books...the books in his own dwelling were the only books that Jonas had ever seen. He had never known that other books existed...this room's walls were completely covered by bookcases, filled, which reached to the ceiling...He couldn't imagine what the thousands of pages contained." (page 74) Jen, too, is wise beyond her years; she has had the opportunity to go out in the real world, something Lucas has never done, and has developed strong relationships with other "shadow children" through the internet. She also uses her time inside to read books and she shares these with Lucas with the purpose of opening up his eyes and inspiring him to take action: "...why'd you make me read the books?' he asked. 'So you'd understand how stupid the Government is,' Jen said. 'So you'd understand why we have to make them see the truth.'" (page 94) Clearly, Lucas's relationship with Jen prompts him to question his situation in the same way that the Giver causes Jonas to think beyond all the limitations that the Community demands.

The limitations prescribed by the societies in which Jonas and Lucas live is another element that both novels share with the most important example being the law which dictates that a family unit may have only two children. The motivation seems to come from a need to control food so that no one goes hungry. Those in the Community of *The Giver* don't see the two-child limit as particularly problematic; it is just one of many rules that control their lives and, on the surface, seems sensible. Their society has little room for individual freedom or developing emotional connections of any sort as made evident by additional laws such as vocational "assignments" at age twelve and the lack of freedom in choosing a spouse. Violations of rules rarely take place in *The Giver* and when they do occur, they are dealt with swiftly and efficiently. So while fear might play a part in causing the members of the Community to follow the laws, it is the unquestioning acceptance of these laws that truly guides the citizens' behavior. In contrast, Lucas, Jen, and all the shadow children that Jen communicates with on the internet indicate that the population law in *Among the Hidden* is frequently violated. Jen's father abuses his status as a member of the Government and both he and Jen's mother manipulate the rules by falsifying documents and offering bribes. The result is that dishonesty and fear run rampant. Regardless of how the law of limiting the number of children per family is enforced, the law itself and the impulse behind it represent a similarity between the two novels. The law is significant as it represents the strongly controlled society in which the two characters live.

In addition to the similarities between the main characters and the laws governing the birth of children, there are several obvious plot comparisons between *The Giver* and *Among the Hidden*. In both, a young boy grows accustomed to his daily life then meets an individual who forces him to question all that he knows. When the boy recognizes that the unjust elements of the society will never change, or will only change by taking action, the choice to leave is debated. In both cases, a trusted and wise friend encourages the boy to follow a particular path

which involves violating rules and breaking away from all he knows. Fear is a motivating factor for both characters and impacts the plot in some way. In the case of Lucas, his fear for his own well-being and the safety of his family ultimately keeps him from joining Jen at the rally of the shadow children. Jonas, on the other hand, is concerned for the life of the baby Gabriel and it is this fear that ultimately motivates him to flee the Community. Lucas's reaction to the brutality of what happens at the rally parallels Jonas's outrage at witnessing his father's role in the "release" of the twin. Only the main character and one other individual--Lucas and Jen's father, Jonas and the Giver--are aware of and upset by these turning points in the novels. For everyone else, the incidents are largely irrelevant, unknown or ignored. In *Among the Hidden*, Jen's father describes the rally scene as follows: "The blood flowed into his (the president's) rose-bushes. But they had the sidewalks scrubbed before the tourists came, so nobody would know." (page 128) In *The Giver*, Jonas's father "opened a small door in the wall...it seemed to be the same sort of chute into which trash was deposited at school. His father loaded the carton containing the body in the chute and gave it a shove. 'Bye-bye, little guy,' Jonas heard his father say before he left the room. Then the screen went blank." (page 150-151) Both of these incidents result in the main character seriously questioning his ability to continue living in such an inhumane society and, ultimately, this questioning leads to an important journey.

While there are many ways that *The Giver* and *Among the Hidden* are alike, the journeys that are described at the conclusion of each novel represent a noteworthy difference. Although Jonas and Lucas's new knowledge about their world prompts them to consider running away, Lucas leaves primarily because he is fearful that the Government will find out about his connection to Jen and that, as a result, he and his family's safety will be at risk. Lucas finds it difficult to leave his family because of the love he has felt from them: "Lucas gulped, unable to keep thinking in his new identity quite yet. It was too soon, too hard, when his shoulders still felt

the warmth of Mother's last hug." (page 147) Jonas, on the other hand, recognizes that love is not a part of his life with his family, only with his relationship with the Giver and Gabriel: "He felt, surprisingly, no fear, nor any regret at leaving the community behind." (page 163)

However, neither boy feels as if he has a choice but to leave. Both have hopes of creating a better life elsewhere. Lucas considers that with a fake I.D. and leaving his family "(h)e could do something to help other third children come out of hiding." (page 146). He also believed he is acting on Jen's behalf: "Someday when we're all free, all the third children, I'll tell everyone about you." (page 152) Similarly, Jonas recognizes the important responsibility he has, not of honoring the memory of one who has died but of saving Gabriel from certain death.

The final pages of each novel convey an important difference in mood. Lucas, while sad and unsure, ultimately embarks on his new life with a sense of purpose and optimism. "Luke stared back at his family's farm as long as he could. He could see just the roof of Jen's house beyond the sparse line of trees. And then, in no time at all, it seemed, everything familiar disappeared over the horizon." (page 153) The last line of *Among the Hidden* represents all of the possibilities that lay before him: "Lee Grant (his new identity) turned around to see what lay ahead." (p. 153) This quote indicates that Lucas accepts his new name and looks forward. The potential for change is there, for letting all the familiar disappear over the horizon, and the tone is hopeful.

The ending of *The Giver*, in contrast, is much more ambiguous. Jonas approaches the last scene exhausted and defeated. About reaching Elsewhere he says, "...he had little hope left that he would be able to reach it." (page 174) Words like "shivering," "numb," "heartbreak," "weak," and "feebly" pepper this same page. There is hope when he uses "his final strength, and a special knowledge that was deep inside him." (page 178) However, Jonas is described as "losing consciousness" (page 178) and unlike Lucas who turns to see what lays ahead, the final lines of

*The Giver* are this: "Behind him, across vast distances of space and time, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music too. But perhaps it was only an echo." (page 179) Jonas only looks back and cannot be sure of what lays ahead. While both boys' fates are left unknown, Lucas as Lee Grant appears on the edge of something exciting and meaningful, while Jonas and Gabriel are battling for their lives, quite possibly imagining the comfort of music as they fall deeper into unconsciousness. The echo mentioned in the last line implies something lost and from that the reader is left with a sense of hopelessness.

*The Giver* and *Among the Hidden* could be considered some of the first titles in the current wave of popularity of dystopian literature among young adults. Not only do these two novels feature teen characters who share many things in common, but the impact of a second character who opens up their world is an undeniable parallel between the two texts. Additionally, forms of control regarding births and the overall plot structures ending with escapes emphasize the novels' strong connections. While differences exist, the most significant seems to be the mood of hopefulness with which *Among the Hidden* concludes, which contrasts with the uncertainty and lack of hope that the reader feels at the end of *The Giver*. Lucas and Jonas represent, on some level, teenage rebellion and the potential for change. By the end of each book, readers are left wondering: Will either of the main characters live up to his potential or will he just fade away like the horizon Lucas sees or the echo Jonas hears?