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Suzanne Collins's War Stories for Kids

By SUSAN DOMINUS
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Back in 2009, the literary agent Rosemary Stimola sat down to read "Mockingjay," the third, highly anticipated book in a wildly popular trilogy of young adult novels by Suzanne Collins. Stimola, who represents Collins, read eagerly until she came to one of the last chapters, in which a firebombing kills thousands of civilians caught in a revolutionary war, including one heartbreakingly innocent and beloved young character. The book was then a computer file, not yet the blockbuster it would become upon its release last August. Changes could still be made. Stimola picked up the phone and called Collins.

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"No!" Stimola wailed. "Don't do it."

She was reacting as a reader, not a career adviser, but perhaps in the back of her mind she was imagining the emotions the plot twist might provoke in the book's youthful fans: depression rather than inspiration, desolation rather than triumph. The capacity of young-adult literature for dark messaging has been expanding since the early '70s, but this poignant loss seemed almost unbearable.

"Oh, but it has to be," Collins told her. Stimola, paraphrasing, recalled the explanation Collins offered her over the phone: "This is not a fairy tale; it's a war, and in war, there are tragic losses that must be mourned."

Collins, a 48-year-old mother of two, spent much of her adult life writing for children's television, dreaming up plot lines for shows like "Wow! Wow! Wubbzy!" a Nick Jr. cartoon aimed at preschoolers. But in the "Hunger Games"

trilogy, she revealed an outsize imagination for suffering and brutality. The books juxtapose the futuristic fantasy of a gleaming, high-tech capital and early-industrial life in the 12 half-starved districts it controls. In a ritual known as the Reaping, two adolescents from each of these oppressed districts are selected at random to participate in the Hunger Games, an annual televised match in which children battle one another and mutated beasts to the death, like Roman gladiators in a glitzy reality-TV contest. The trilogy's heroine, Katniss, 16 years old when the series begins, has the tough-girl angst of an S.E. Hinton teenager and is too focused on survival to spend much time on familiar Y.A.

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preoccupations like cliques and crushes. On the very first page, she stares at the family's pet cat, recalling, matter-of-factly, her aborted attempt to "drown him in a bucket." By the last book, she is leading a revolution.

You could predict that adolescents — who keep slasher films in business — would find the "Hunger Games" trilogy mesmerizing. More surprising is how many adults, bookstore owners report, buy the books for themselves or to read with their children. Collins has said that the premise for "The Hunger Games" came to her one evening when she was channel-surfing and flipped from a reality-television competition to footage from the war in Iraq. An overt critique of violence, the series makes warfare deeply personal, forcing readers to contemplate their own roles as desensitized voyeurs.

By the time "Mockingjay" appeared, "The Hunger Games" had become part of a kind of publishing holy trinity, taking its place alongside J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series and Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight." When "Mockingjay" was released at midnight, some bookstores kept their doors open for those readers who could not wait until the break of day to discover the fate of their favorite characters. As soon as the hype of the last book died down, speculation about the film version of "The Hunger Games" (slated for release next March) began to build. The casting of Katniss — whom The Atlantic called "the most important female character in recent pop culture history" — inspired a frenzy of online commentary. Last month, when Lionsgate announced that Jennifer Lawrence (of "Winter's Bone") would play Katniss, so many opinionated fans lighted up the blogosphere with objections (too old! too blond!) that the film's director, Gary Ross, gave an interview to Entertainment Weekly assuring them that Collins was herself committed to the choice.

What Collins thinks matters a great deal to her fans, although they rarely hear from her directly. Collins has always been a media-shy figure, given to few public pronouncements, most of them carefully packaged. Her indictment of the media in "The Hunger Games" — the camera is the enemy, celebrity an empty, even dangerous contrivance — is reflected in her desire to keep fame at arm's length. Collins's readings and appearances are usually off-limits to television cameras, and she declines almost any interaction that involves capturing her on videotape. She has a surprisingly modest, low-tech personal Web site and has never been known to post on Twitter (which even [Judy Blume](#) does these days). She did, however, agree to a rare interview at the offices of her publisher, Scholastic, where she feels most comfortable.

A small woman with fine features and long, flowing hair, Collins is confident and entertaining in person, displaying none of the earnest anxiousness of some of her taped interviews. Her life story may be less dramatic than the rags-to-riches tales of Rowling and Meyer — neither had published anything before their best-selling successes — but like them, she spent much of her life in relative obscurity. A military brat whose family moved frequently, she met and later married an actor, Cap Pryor, at [Indiana University](#) and arrived in New York at 25 to work on her M.F.A. in dramatic writing at [New York University](#). After graduation, she started writing for children's television, eventually becoming head writer on "Clifford's Puppy Days." Squeezed for space after they had children (a boy, now 17, and a girl, now 11), Collins and Pryor left Manhattan for Connecticut. There, encouraged by a friend, Collins wrote the first book of her first series for children, "The Underland Chronicles." It follows the adventures of a boy, Gregor, drawn into a world of oversize insects and animal life battling for supremacy far beneath the surface of New York City. When it was published, Collins was already 41.

Collins's move from writing about an oversize red dog to writing about weaponry and military strategy may seem unexpected, but she was falling back on years of informal schooling on the subject of war. Her grandfather was gassed in World War I, and her uncle

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sustained shrapnel wounds in World War II. Some of Collins's earliest memories are of young men in uniform drilling at West Point, where her father, who later made lieutenant colonel, was on loan from the Air Force, teaching military history.

In 1968 the family moved to Indiana. It was the year Collins turned 6. It was also the year her father left to serve in Vietnam. War was a favorite topic for her father; and war, she understood at a young age, determined her family's fate. "If your parent is deployed and you are that young, you spend the whole time wondering where they are and waiting for them to come home," she said. "As time passes and the absence is longer and longer, you become more and more concerned — but you don't really have the words to express your concern. There's only this continued absence."

Although young-adult fiction often dispenses with caretakers to give the characters control over their own lives, the anxiety provoked by an absent parent seems particularly pivotal in Collins's fiction: "Gregor the Overlander" starts with a young boy's pining for a mysteriously missing father. In "The Hunger Games," it is clear early on that the death of Katniss's father has forced her into the uncomfortable role of family provider. The lifelong repercussions of Collins's father's service in Vietnam also provided her with a perspective that fuels a key plot twist of "Mockingjay," which follows one character's struggle to recover from tortured memories of violence. (In his case, the memories are false, created by an enemy who plants them in his mind.) Collins said her father came back from Vietnam enduring "nightmares, and that lasted his whole life." As a child, she awoke, at times, to the sound of him crying out during those painful dreams.

Five years after her father's return, the Air Force moved the family to Brussels, where he seized every opportunity to educate his children about the region's violent past. No monument or battlefield went unnoticed. "And this was Europe, which is one gigantic battlefield," Collins said. A family trip to a castle, which she imagined would be "fairy-tale magical," turned into a lesson on fortresses. "My dad's holding me back from the tour to show me where they poured the boiling oil, where the arrow slits are. And then you're just like, wait a minute!" She laughed. "This isn't what I had in mind." She threw her arms in the air, sighing loudly, channeling her 13-year-old self. "I should have knooooown better," she groaned.

A field of poppies outside the family's home near Brussels struck Collins as an image straight out of "The Wizard of Oz" — until her father recited "In Flanders Fields," a World War I poem told from the perspective of a soldier buried in a field of poppies. (Fans of "The Hunger Games" might wonder if the Mockingjay, a mutated songbird that becomes the symbol of revolution, originated with the bird that figures prominently in this poem: "The larks, still bravely singing, fly/Scarce heard amid the guns below.") In the Scholastic conference room, Collins recited the verse, slowly and gravely, as her father no doubt once did, then paused for dramatic effect. "Boom!" she said. "O.K., so this moment becomes transformative, because now I'm looking out onto that field and wondering if it was a graveyard." Grim as her father's spontaneous tutorials were, she never resented them. "He was very interesting, fortunately. My God, it would have been hell if he wasn't."

In "The Hunger Games" Collins embraces her father's impulse to educate young people about the realities of war. "If we wait too long, what kind of expectation can we have?" she said. "We think we're sheltering them, but what we're doing is putting them at a disadvantage." But her medicine goes down easily, thanks to cliffhangers, star-crossed lovers and the kinds of details that create a fully formed universe. Collins labored for days over the construction of the arenas in "The Hunger Games," analyzing "Rambo" clips to help her visualize the use of weaponry like crossbows.

Some critics have grumbled that Collins indulges in too many diversions — including lavish descriptions of costumes that undercut her critique of superficial ideals of beauty. But she knows when to break the tension with pure fantasy. Her pacing is precise and ruthless, even if she knows just how much she can twist the knife — how much bloodshed falls within tolerable boundaries. “The boy from District 1 dies before he can pull out the spear,” observes Katniss of her prey in one scene. “My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood.” In “The Hunger Games” violence is embedded in a psychologically nuanced world: even the most loathsome, bloodthirsty young fighters are clearly victims of the programming and training they received during the years they spent preparing for the games. In “The Lord of the Flies,” the children are in an amoral free fall; in “The Hunger Games,” young people, even murderous ones, are for the most part innocents, creations of adults’ cruelty or victims of adult weakness in the face of power.

Writing in The New Yorker last year, Laura Miller suggested that “The Hunger Games” is most coherent when read as “a fever-dream allegory of the adolescent social experience”: doesn’t everything feel like life or death on the battlefield known as the high-school cafeteria? Many of Collins’s fans surely see “The Hunger Games” through this prism (one children’s-bookstore owner told me the books would be a good tool for teachers broaching the subject of popularity). For protective parents, reading “The Hunger Games” as an allegory of adolescence rather than of war may be more comfortable. But this is not a theory that appeals to Collins. “I don’t write about adolescence,” she said. “I write about war. For adolescents.”

Collins’s fiction inevitably echoes other dystopian literature in which states subject their citizens to novel forms of oppression, like George Orwell’s “1984” or Margaret Atwood’s “Handmaid’s Tale.” Even more pronounced are the similarities between “The Hunger Games” and “Battle Royale,” a Japanese novel published in 1999. Each book involves young people selected at random and pitted against one another in a game of survival staged by tyrannical authorities. The parallels are striking enough that Collins’s work has been savaged on the blogosphere as a baldfaced ripoff. The authors share an interest in the mechanisms of state control, but their agendas clearly diverge. “Battle Royale” is a more deliberate study of adolescence, its coming-of-age savageries and posturings. “You’ve become quite a stud,” a dying girl tells the classmate who cradles her in his arms. When it was published, “Battle Royale” played into Japan’s fears about a rise in youth violence; Collins’s heroes are, if anything, models of responsibility. When I asked Collins if she had drawn from “Battle Royale,” she was unperturbed. “I had never heard of that book or that author until my book was turned in. At that point, it was mentioned to me, and I asked my editor if I should read it. He said: ‘No, I don’t want that world in your head. Just continue with what you’re doing.’” She has yet to read the book or to see the movie.

There are enough possible sources for the plot line that the two authors might well have hit on the same basic setup independently (outrageous reality-television shows arrived in Japan before they did in the United States). As her primary influence, Collins, who has a love of classical plays, frequently cites the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, in which the people of Athens are required by their Cretan adversaries to offer up seven boys and seven girls for sacrifice to the deadly Minotaur, a half-human monster who lives in a maze. “I was also heavily influenced by the historical figure Spartacus,” she said. “Katniss follows the same arc from slave to gladiator to rebel to face of a war.”

“Battle Royale” does present an interesting precedent in one respect. When it was adapted into a film in Japan in 2000, politicians denounced its gory youth-on-youth violence, even

as the Japanese film academy nominated it for nearly every prestigious award. The makers of the "Hunger Games" movie hope to avoid a similar controversy. The director, Gary Ross, has pledged that it will be safe for viewers as young as 12. But it is one thing to depict bloodshed on paper, another to do so on film. Collins was enlisted to write the original script. Ross, whose films include "Big" and "Pleasantville," completed the final treatment, consulting heavily with Collins. In February, she flew out to Los Angeles to discuss sets, costumes and changes to the script. Though many directors might find such collaboration burdensome, Ross seems to welcome it. When Collins, looking at a set design, pointed out that the government building on a town square needed to loom more prominently — as a more obvious symbol of power — Ross agreed. Collins has been included in casting discussions as well. "I want her to be on the set as much as possible," Ross said. "I'd like her next to me every day."

While Collins was working on the first book of "The Underland Chronicles," she spent hours on the phone with her father, plotting strategic alliances that would make military sense. "We had two superpowers, the humans and the bats," she said, "but the humans were dependent on the alliance with the bats, because then they became aerial fighters." Her father died before the first book was published, but he continues to exert an influence on her writing. The project she is exploring most actively right now is a children's book based on the year he was serving overseas. Her most autobiographical work to date, it will use her family members' names; illustrations will be based on family photographs from that era. "I specifically want to do this book, one as a sort of memory piece kind of honoring that year for my family, and two, because I know so many children are experiencing it right now — having deployed parents," Collins said. "And it's a way I would like to try and communicate my own experience to them."

Collins is also researching another young-adult series (typically cautious, she would not say more). As for the change in her own family's fortunes, she said that she has been slow to feel it, because of how payments are structured in publishing. For now, she seems intent on doing as much as she can to avoid becoming someone who would be, God forbid, recognized on the street. "I'm not a very fancy person," she said. "I've been a writer a long time, and right now 'The Hunger Games' is getting a lot of focus. It'll pass. The focus will be on something else. It'll shift. It always does. And that seems just fine."

Coming from most authors, this might sound like obligatory modesty. Coming from Collins, it sounds as if she knows her history.

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