

Jennifer Lawrence in 'The Hunger Games' Delivers for Fans

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – What is remarkable about the book phenomenon known as “The Hunger Games” is how rich, literary and symbolic the series is, considering they are for a “young adult” audience. Jennifer Lawrence, Stanley Tucci, Elizabeth Banks, Woody Harrelson and Josh Hutcherson bring the characters to life.

Easily one of the most highly anticipated book-to-film interpretations of the year, “The Hunger Games” succeeds by drawing on its source directly, and adding touches of scenic and character wonder that astounds the senses, satisfying the feel and depth of the books. Jennifer Lawrence is a perfect Katniss, one of the most anticipated literary protagonists put to film since Harry Potter. The pacing is deliberate, but conveys a solid punch by the end that ripples emotionally and symbolically that is about to significantly alter its “fictional” landscape.

“The Hunger Games” are set in a future United States territory that has been devastated by war and has evolved into a functionary and fascist country. Instead of states, there are 12 Districts, each contributing resources that are controlled by “the Capitol” and unobtainable for most of the citizenry. Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) lives in District 12, the coal provider, and helps keep a small family together that includes her beloved sister Prim (Willow Shields).



Glitz: Stanley Tucci (Caesar) and Jennifer Lawrence (Katniss) in 'The Hunger Games'
Photo credit: Murray Close for Lionsgate

Every year, the districts gather to send two young representatives to the Hunger Games, a reality TV contest that is a last-person-standing fight to the death. When Prim is picked for District 12, Katniss steps up and takes her place. The boy picked is Peeta (Josh Hutcherson), and together they head to the Capitol to participate, and forever intertwine their lives. On the journey through the competition they will encounter a mentor named Haymitch (Woody Harrelson), flighty Effie (Elizabeth Banks), fashion designer Cinna (Lenny Kravitz), weird TV host Caesar (Stanley Tucci) and their fellow contestants, who all want them dead.

The film starts with a bang, rendering District 12 as a stark reminder of the 20th Century Depression era in America. Director Gary Ross uses the photographs of 1930s photographer Dorothea Lange as a template, and the hilly feel of Appalachian coal country as a setting – the citizens of the districts get nothing in return for their labors, except threats against their lives, and Katniss is forced to become a hunter/gatherer to feed her family, who have lost their coal miner father to an accident. The sorrowful faces, the costuming and the struggles are acutely felt and provides an impressive contrast to the overstuffed Capitol.

And that Capitol amazingly lights up the screen. It is a privileged area filled with stylized characters that would make Marie Antoinette proud. The Hunger Games are a roman gladiator style amusement to them, and pairing it with a sportscenter-like TV commentary is chilling. This is one of the elements from the book that is best portrayed in the movie, Stanley Tucci's Caesar is the quintessential phony game show host, complete with flashy false teeth and fake sentiment. Director Ross puts a mantle of desperation onto the entire Capitol environment, with the citizens of that region seemingly as trapped as the Districts.

Jennifer Lawrence fulfills the role of Katniss completely. Since the character is the glue of the story, she carefully mines the feelings of the "girl on fire," and paints them with a subtle brush. Even as she faces off with the TV host, her perkiness has a bit of rancor behind it, which defines Katniss as a reluctant hero. Stanley Tucci, Woody Harrelson, Lenny Kravitz and Elizabeth Banks pop their characters right out of the book, but there are some casting missteps. The younger cast and contestants have problems with the air of dread, especially Liam Hemsworth as Gale, the hometown boyfriend of Katniss, and Josh Hutcherson's Peeta, much too milquetoast versus his assignment, which could be the point.



Strategy: Mentor Woody Harrelson (Haymitch) and Jennifer Lawrence in 'The Hunger Games'
Photo credit: Murray Close for Lionsgate

The film does take its time getting to the action, no doubt in deference to its literary source, but to non-readers of the book it might drag a bit. But the themes that make the book so contemporary – the 1% versus the 99, people starving while technological kingdoms thrive and false television spectacle over real connection or emotion – are direct punches to the gut of our society. This is George Orwell's "1984" for the masses, more relevant and simply expressed.

Katniss is a hope, and in future tales of her adventures that hope will most likely be challenged. If something like the Districts and the Capitol were to emerge from the rubble of our hubris, would the hope also emerge? Eventually, the majority will just get sick of being afraid.

"The Hunger Games" opens everywhere on March 23rd. Featuring Jennifer Lawrence, Stanley Tucci, Elizabeth Banks, Woody Harrelson, Donald Sutherland, Lenny Kravitz, Wes Bentley, Willow Shields and Josh Hutcherson. Screenplay adapted by Gary Ross, Billy Ray and Suzanne Collins (from her novel) Directed by Gary Ross. Rated "PG-13"



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