

TO THE DEATH

Suzanne Collins Kills

By Elissa Petruzzli

WHEN WORD HIT the *RT* office that Suzanne Collins was game to meet for an in-person interview, our excitement was so great that four of us — *four*, when really, one would have sufficed — showed up to meet the author of last year's extraordinary young adult novel *The Hunger Games*. As we jostled into the room at the Javits convention center during BookExpo America to meet Collins — and, to be honest, to secure advance copies of her sequel, *Catching Fire*, out this month from Scholastic — the author graciously accepted our fawning compliments before sitting down to dish.

For a woman who penned such an out-of-the-gate blockbuster, Collins is charmingly humble.

"It's overwhelming to me," she says of the success of *The Hunger Games*. The book, which debuted as the No. 9 *New York Times* bestseller last September and has stayed on the list ever since, has become something of a phenomenon. At the publishing conference where we talked to Collins, *Catching Fire* was considered the book to snag, out of the thousands available.

Part of the appeal, Collins believes, is that while her tale is populated mainly with teenagers, 16-year-old Katniss' story of living in a bleak future, where she must participate in the deadly Hunger Games (see sidebar), is really a story for all ages.

"I'm extremely happy it's found an audience, and really a more diverse audience than I anticipated," says Collins. "My father-in-law likes it."

Luckily for fans, Collins isn't letting success spook her; instead, she's just concentrating on writing. As to penning a sequel to such a successful book, the author says that she didn't let the buzz bother her, mainly because of her publishing schedule.

"Fortunately, I had already written it," she says. "The schedule on this is tight, so by the time *The Hunger Games* came out I was through the first draft, and maybe the second, of *Catching Fire*, so you do get a little bit of a grace period where you're not getting too much information."

To keep her creativity flowing, the author stays away from Internet chatter. "You sort of do have to work to construct walls of silence," Collins says. "I can't go online, I can't listen to a lot of Internet discussion about it. It's not helpful to my writing process."

She does admit she may look into what people are saying — eventually. "Maybe when the entire series is completed I'll go



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"SHE IS A VERY REAL GIRL, WITH GOOD AIM"

check some of that stuff out," she laughs. "It's really better for me to just stay in my cave and work out the story, and then we'll see what people think. It's not going to change what I write."

That's because Collins has had the three-book arc planned from the beginning.

"This one was always a trilogy. Every book is leading to the larger conclusion," she says. "I came from the theater, and the books are all basically structured like three-act plays," Collins says. "There are three books and I think of them as act one, two and three."

Collins remains firm that there will only be three books in the series. "I think a series should be absolutely how long it takes you to tell your story," she says. "To arbitrarily go on and do books past the natural life of the story, I don't think you're

EXCERPT: The Hunger Games

doing the book or your audience a service."

And even though Collins is quite sure of the details of Katniss' fate, she's not talking. "I won't tell you. You cannot get that information out of me," she laughs. The author swears to keep mum — especially about whom Katniss ends up with, Peeta or Gale. But she does promise that there will be some sort of resolution.

"Romance is very powerful," she says. "You have to be careful with it, because I know for myself, if there is a romance in something — even in an action movie, even if it's not very developed — I still want to see how it turns out. You have to be careful how you use it."

Collins was surprised to find that her fans were so invested in the romance subplot. There are even Team Gale and Team Peeta T-shirts available on the Internet.

"I just started out with the initial story, and the romance sort of naturally developed. Then it became far more key than I had anticipated, and the reason it did that is because Peeta makes it a strategy in the game. Well, once it's tied in to the game, the two become inseparable," she says. "I was surprised because I was thinking sci-fi, dystopia." Yet Collins willingly went along with Peeta's plan. "It saved me a lot of work, if you can integrate the two themes."

But for a girl with two guys after her, Katniss is very much a tomboy, a deliberate move on Collins' part. "I knew that I needed a girl who was going to be a contender in the Hunger Games, and that meant that she had to be genuinely skilled in survival." So Collins set about making Katniss a bit of a badass — but one who had worked very hard to attain her skills.

"I wanted it to have a realistic feel, and so she acquires those skills, like the bowhunting and the trapping and the gathering of foods, out of necessity," says Collins.

"It's something she learns gradually, over the years, because she's not a magical character," she says, a point that was important to her. "So many of the books you read now that are fantasy, people have undiscovered powers or these talents that make these things accessible to them, but everything she has is hard-earned. She is a very real girl, with good aim."

Despite being an amazing shot, Collins strove to make Katniss relatable.

"I wanted a protagonist who was one of those kids — and I knew kids like this when I was growing up — who have responsibility thrust upon them at an early age," says the author. "She takes hardship in stride, I thought that was really important. You don't want to go through the Hunger Games with a whiner, nobody wants to do that for 400 pages," she laughs.

And there's layer upon layer of hardship in the books, as Katniss enters the arena to fight to the death, a premise that Collins follows through on.

"My feeling was, if you're going to choose to do this topic, then you do it; if you're going to say it's about these kids fighting to the death, then a lot of them have to die," she says. "And if you're not going to commit to doing that at the beginning of the book, then you should write about something else. Don't lead people down a path that's not going



Want to catch up? Here's an excerpt that outlines the terrifying concept of The Hunger Games.

Just as the town clock strikes two, the mayor steps up to the podium and begins to read. It's the same story every year. He tells of the history of Panem, the country that rose out of the ashes of a place called North America. He lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained. The result was Panem, a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens. Then came the Dark Days, the uprising of the districts against the Capitol. Twelve were defeated, the thirteenth obliterated. The Treaty of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee peace and, as our yearly reminder that the Dark Days must never be

repeated, it gave us the Hunger Games.

The rules of the Hunger Games are simple. In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty-four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could be anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins.

Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch — this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion. Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. "Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen."

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to reach the promised destination. They'll just feel cheated."

That's not to say that Collins takes writing death scenes lightly. "I tried very hard for the violence not to be gratuitous and for it to have an impact on the characters who remain," she says. She points out that even in her middle-grade fiction series *The Underland Chronicles*, "no death was really extraneous."

"It was either someone who was close to the protagonist, or it was someone we cared about deeply, so that the death, you couldn't just write them off, you had to take at least a moment and experience someone's grief," she says.

Grief, action, adventure and romance ... it's no wonder Collins' trilogy has become such a success for all ages. We at *RT* can't wait to see what Katniss does next. ♦

For more, visit SuzanneCollinsBooks.com.