

My favourite book

Muhammad Khan

S

It is difficult to talk about my favourite book as there are so many deserving of this title. Different genres, different emotions, different formats – I'm especially fond of the much-maligned graphic novel. Ask me this question on any day of the week and my answer might be different. But today, my favourite book is *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins.

Katniss Everdeen is described as having black hair, olive skin and grey eyes. She says that she and Gale (part of the central love triangle – how Young Adult!) look like they could be brother and sister. Add adorable Rue to the mix, described as having dark brown skin and eyes, and I felt real progress had been made in mainstream fiction for prominently representing ethnically diverse peoples. Whether Collins intended for her characters to be read as people of colour or not is up for debate. Indeed, when Amandla Stenberg was cast in the role of Rue, the internet became a hotbed of bigoted views of how Rue was supposed to be a 'sweet, innocent blonde'. As terrible as things are in Panem, the world of the book, at least nobody's a racist.

The book opens by breaking a cardinal writer's rule: do not start with your main character waking up. Collins circumnavigates this by making the day hold major significance. The reader is immediately hooked and wants to

know why The Reaping is so important to the people of Panem and why Katniss and her family are fearful of it.

Unlike most female protagonists in Young Adult fiction, Katniss is not personable and yet we feel empathy towards her. At the tender age of 16, she's already had a hard life but doesn't complain about it. We are told that she was close to her father who died in a mine explosion. In the aftermath her mother is unable to cope, forcing Katniss to take on the role of both father and mother to little sister Prue. Katniss's tenacity in the face of adversity makes us root for her. She may not be the most lovable character, but there is an honesty to the code she lives by that we can all appreciate.

As exciting as the central conceit is – a boy and a girl from each district must compete in the annual Hunger Games in a battle royale to the death to win generous rewards for their home city and their own families – it is the human drama and, in particular, the moral dilemmas Katniss faces that raise the book above its dystopian contemporaries. Katniss will not allow herself to love anyone other than her little sister Prue. After losing her father – who we assume was the centre of her universe – we can understand why she tries to live an emotionless life. If you don't love people, you can never be hurt by their indifference (her mother) or their absence (her father).

Katniss finds her male counterpart Peeta's emotions a weakness. Once upon a time, when she was starving, he gave her bread from his family's bakery and was beaten for it. When he is named alongside Katniss as District 12's tribute to the games, Katniss realises she will have to kill him to survive. That she begins to fall in love with him and hates him for it makes the book unputdownable.

Collins' *opus magnus* is a masterclass in creating a thrilling, open-world story in the first person while keeping the prose simple and the characters richly flawed.

Muhammad Khan

Muhammad Khan is an engineer, a secondary-school maths teacher, and a YA author! He takes his inspiration from the children he teaches, as well as his own upbringing as a British-born Pakistani. He lives in South London and has an MA in Creative Writing from St Mary's. His debut novel *I Am Thunder* was shortlisted for the YA Book Prize, won the Branford Boase First Novel Award, the 2018 Great Reads Award and a number of regional awards. His second novel, *Kick the Moon* is also published by Macmillan Children's Books. He is a World Book Day selected author.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

© Muhammad Khan