

The Giver

Speaker: Ray Slavens

Lois Lowry: Born in 1937 in Honolulu, Hawaii, Lois Lowry grew up in New York, Pennsylvania, and Tokyo. She is the author of a number of books for children and young adults and has won a number of awards for her novels, including several for *The Giver*. She is known for writing books that tackle difficult subject matter for young people, including terminal disease, racism, and questioning authority.

Published in 1993, *The Giver* is a dystopian novel full of suspense and fantasy. It is set at some point in the very distant future, but no precise time or place is stated. Even though it is set in the future, the story is told in past tense, as if it had already happened. In the sterile world of the novel, there are no animals other than humans and the stuffed comfort animals given to children when they are named. While the story is written in third person point of view, we don't see into the minds of any characters other than Jonas, making it third person limited.

Themes: There are a number of important themes in this novel.

The most obvious is the importance of history, memory. At some point in the distant past, the community has decided that life will be better if the collective memory of the entire group is placed in the hands and mind of one person, the Receiver, who will serve as the keeper of the community's collective memory – and its pain. Yet, the Giver and young Jonas come to the conclusion that life without memory and emotion and pain – all the good and bad things in life – is no life at all. That suffering is as necessary as ecstasy in life.

Another important theme is individualism. In Jonas's community, individuality has been almost eradicated, replaced by "Sameness." Yet bits of individuality have not been destroyed, such as the different eyes of Jonas and Gabriel. Part of life for young adults is breaking away from the identity imposed by family and school and developing one's own unique identity, which may be one of the reasons why this novel, about Jonas's recognition that he must be allowed to be himself, resonates so much with young adult readers. Part of Jonas's journey from childhood to adulthood is a necessary break from the world of his parents and community as a way to develop into his own personal identity.

The imposition of rules is another theme of the novel. We all live in a world where rules are imposed on us. Some rules we agree with and support while we may disagree with other rules that we are required to live by. But without some rules, would chaos ensue? Anarchy? Aren't schools and churches, in part, tasked with the job of imposing rules by which students and parishioners are expected to live? And the result of breaking rules might be mild or major. One may receive the figurative slap-on-the-hand or one might be completely ostracized from his community. In *The Giver*, rules may be strict, but community members are trained from childhood to believe that breaking rules brings great disgrace not only to the one who breaks the rule, but to his entire family. Rules are very strictly guarded, and some carry very

serious punishments. But community members have learned from earliest childhood that the rules are absolute and right and not to be questioned.

Family is also an important theme in this novel. None of the characters in the book knows his or her actual birth family. Children are taken from the Birthmother immediately after birth and placed in the care of the Nurturers. It seems clear that most community members never experience sex and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it, due to the pills they take each day to dispel the Stirrings. In a sense, some might see these families in the novel as artificial in everything from their superficial daily interactions to their very conception. In 1993 when the novel was published, the United States was struggling with what many saw as the disintegration of the traditional nuclear family. Might this novel make some commentary about this debate? Is Jonas attempting to create a more real family for himself and Gabriel as they leave for the Elsewhere?

The society of the novel is also very ritualistic. For every action where community members may feel uncomfortable with some emotional situation, there is a ritual in place to help ease the emotional discomfort of the people. From apologizing for the slightest infraction and ritually accepting that apology, to rituals surrounding the release of individuals from the House of the Old, rituals are expected to be strictly adhered to.

A question that the novel addresses is whether or not one can know pleasure if one has never experienced pain. Jonas and his community, we are led to believe, have really never experienced either. The Receiver experiences both for the whole community so that they don't have to experience emotional extremes and can live a quiet, predictable, and perhaps dull life. None of us can really know, however, whether living without pain prevents us from experiencing pleasure, since all of us, on some level, have experienced both.

Safety and comfort make up another important issue dealt with in the novel. Apparently, in order to escape pain and the frustration of choosing the wrong mate and a variety of other unpleasant outcomes, the communal society of Jonas's village and those that are outside his community but part of a larger society have deemed it necessary to create a world that is almost flawlessly safe and comfortable. But what is the price for this perfection? And is it worth it? Sameness is forced upon the community, but nobody seems to resist. Is it because they are so conditioned to accept this reality that they are unable to see beyond it?

Fantasy Fiction: Fantasy novels tend to also be quest stories, stories where a sometimes reluctant hero who may feel unsure of herself must go out into the world, away from their place of origin, and seek some treasure, whether that treasure is an actual treasure, like the golden fleece sought by Jason and the Argonauts, or some spiritual or psychological truth. Sometimes the hero must sacrifice himself to save the community. Sometimes the quest involves rescuing others who are in danger.

Dystopian Fiction: Dystopian fiction is similar to fantasy in that it exists in an imagined world that is enough like our own world to make it unsettling because it feels familiar and unfamiliar at the same

time. In dystopian fiction, one first has to understand what utopian fiction is. Utopian fiction exists in a perfect world, an ideal place where nothing can go wrong. There is no pain, no death. Life is ideal. Dystopian fiction puts a twist on this sense of perfection by creating a world which may seem perfect at first, and in fact may feel perfect to its characters (or some of them), but as the stories unfold, faults in the perfect façade begin to appear, to crack, to fall apart, and often to be completely destroyed. In dystopian worlds, community members face regularly enforced behaviors, strictly guided lives, little room for choice, and potential destruction of dissenters.

Yet the hero of dystopian fiction is the one who comes to see the problems with the supposed utopia in which she lives and decides to do something to change it. Some famous examples of dystopian fiction include Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Fahrenheit 451*, and Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series. Dystopian fiction serves as a warning to its readers of dangerous outcomes that might lie ahead if the warning is not heeded. Dystopian fiction goes back to the 18th century with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and has remained a popular genre ever since.

In dystopian fantasy novels written for young adults, the hero is often a young adult, himself. He may at first be content with the way things are organized in this presumed perfect world. The young adult dystopian hero experiences the same issues and concerns that other young adult fiction heroes go through. They experience friendship, loss, desire, uncertainty, and a need for independence.

Works Cited

Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1993.

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