A TENTH ANNIVERSARY INTERVIEW WITH SUZANNE COLLINS

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the publication of *The Hunger Games*, author Suzanne Collins and publisher David Levithan discussed the evolution of the story, the editorial process, and the first ten years of the life of the trilogy, encompassing both books and films. The following is their written conversation.

NOTE: The following interview contains a discussion of all three books in The Hunger Games Trilogy, so if you have yet to read *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, you may want to read them before reading the full interview.

DAVID LEVITHAN: Let's start at the origin moment for *The Hunger Games*. You were flipping channels one night . . .

SUZANNE COLLINS: Yes, I was flipping through the channels one night between reality television programs and actual footage of the Iraq War, when the idea came to me. At the time, I was completing the fifth book in The Underland Chronicles and my brain was shifting to whatever the next project would be. I had been grappling with another story that just couldn't get any air under its wings. I knew I wanted to continue to explore writing about just war theory for young audiences. In The Underland Chronicles, I'd examined the idea of an unjust war developing into a just war because of greed, xenophobia, and long-standing hatreds. For the next series, I wanted a completely new world and a different angle into the just war debate.

DL: Can you tell me what you mean by the "just war theory" and how that applies to the setup of the trilogy?

SC: Just war theory has evolved over thousands of years in an attempt to define what circumstances give you the moral right to wage war and what is acceptable behavior within that war and its aftermath. The why and the how. It helps differentiate between what's considered a necessary and an unnecessary war. In The Hunger Games Trilogy, the districts rebel against their own government because of its corruption. The citizens of the districts have no basic human rights, are treated as slave labor, and are subjected to the Hunger Games annually. I believe the majority of today's audience would define that as grounds for revolution. They have just cause but the nature of the conflict raises a lot of questions. Do the districts have the authority to wage war? What is their chance of success? How does the reemergence of District 13 alter the situation? When we enter the story, Panem is a powder keg and Katniss the spark.

DL: As with most novelists I know, once you have that origin moment — usually a connection of two elements (in this case, war and entertainment) — the number of connections quickly increases, as different elements of the story take their place. I know another connection you made early on was with mythology, particularly the myth of Theseus. How did that piece come to fit?

SC: I was such a huge Greek mythology geek as a kid, it's impossible for it not to come into play in my storytelling. As a young prince of Athens, he participated in a lottery that required seven girls and seven boys to be taken to Crete and thrown into a labyrinth to be destroyed by the Minotaur. In one version of the myth, this excessively cruel punishment resulted from the Athenians opposing Crete in a war. Sometimes the labyrinth's a maze; sometimes it's an arena. In my teens I read Mary Renault's *The King Must Die*, in which the tributes end up in the Bull Court. They're trained to perform with a wild bull for an audience composed of the elite of Crete who bet on the

entertainment. Theseus and his team dance and handspring over the bull in what's called bull-leaping. You can see depictions of this in ancient sculpture and vase paintings. The show ended when they'd either exhausted the bull or one of the team had been killed. After I read that book, I could never go back to thinking of the labyrinth as simply a maze, except perhaps ethically. It will always be an arena to me.

DL: But in this case, you dispensed with the Minotaur, no? Instead, the arena harkens more to gladiator vs. gladiator than to gladiator vs. bull. What influenced this construction?

SC: A fascination with the gladiator movies of my childhood, particularly *Spartacus*. Whenever it ran, I'd be glued to the set. My dad would get out *Plutarch's Lives* and read me passages from "Life of Crassus," since Spartacus, being a slave, didn't rate his own book. It's about a person who's forced to become a gladiator, breaks out of the gladiator school/arena to lead a rebellion, and becomes the face of a war. That's the dramatic arc of both the real-life Third Servile War and the fictional Hunger Games Trilogy.

DL: Can you talk about how war stories influenced you as a young reader, and then later as a writer? How did this knowledge of war stories affect your approach to writing *The Hunger Games*?

SC: Now you can find many wonderful books written for young audiences that deal with war. That wasn't the case when I was growing up. It was one of the reasons Greek mythology appealed to me: the characters battled, there was the Trojan War. My family had been heavily impacted by war the year my father, who was career Air Force, went to Vietnam, but except for my myths, I rarely encountered it in books. I liked *Johnny Tremain* but it ends as

the Revolutionary War kicks off. The one really memorable book I had about war was *Boris* by Jaap ter Haar, which deals with the Siege of Leningrad in World War II.

My war stories came from my dad, a historian and a doctor of political science. The four years before he left for Vietnam, the Army borrowed him from the Air Force to teach at West Point. His final assignment would be at Air Command and Staff College. As his kids, we were never too young to learn, whether he was teaching us history or taking us on vacation to a battlefield or posing a philosophical dilemma. He approached history as a story, and fortunately he was a very engaging storyteller. As a result, in my own writing, war felt like a completely natural topic for children.

DL: Another key piece of *The Hunger Games* is the voice and perspective that Katniss brings to it. I know some novelists start with a character and then find a story through that character, but with *The Hunger Games* (and correct me if I'm wrong) I believe you had the idea for the story first, and then Katniss stepped into it. Where did she come from? I'd love for you to talk about the origin of her name, and also the origin of her very distinctive voice.

SC: Katniss appeared almost immediately after I had the idea, standing by the bed with that bow and arrow. I'd spent a lot of time during The Underland Chronicles weighing the attributes of different weapons. I used archers very sparingly because they required light and the Underland has little natural illumination. But a bow and arrow can be handmade, shot from a distance, and weaponized when the story transitions into warfare. She was a born archer.

Her name came later, while I was researching survival training and specifically edible plants. In one of my books, I found the arrowhead plant,

and the more I read about it, the more it seemed to reflect her. Its Latin name has the same roots as Sagittarius, the archer. The edible tuber roots she could gather, the arrowhead-shaped leaves were her defense, and the little white blossoms kept it in the tradition of flower names, like Rue and Primrose. I looked at the list of alternative names for it. *Swamp Potato*. *Duck Potato*. *Katniss* easily won the day.

As to her voice, I hadn't intended to write in first person. I thought the book would be in the third person like The Underland Chronicles. Then I sat down to work and the first page poured out in first person, like she was saying, "Step aside, this is my story to tell." So I let her.

DL: I am now trying to summon an alternate universe where the Mockingjay is named Swamp Potato Everdeen. Seems like a PR challenge. But let's stay for a second on the voice — because it's not a straightforward, generic American voice. There's a regionalism to it, isn't there? Was that present from the start?

SC: It was. There's a slight District 12 regionalism to it, and some of the other tributes use phrases unique to their regions as well. The way they speak, particularly the way in which they refuse to speak like citizens of the Capitol, is important to them. No one in District 12 wants to sound like Effie Trinket unless they're mocking her. So they hold on to their regionalisms as a quiet form of rebellion. The closest thing they have to freedom of speech is their manner of speaking.

DL: I'm curious about Katniss's family structure. Was it always as we see it, or did you ever consider giving her parents greater roles? How much do you think the Everdeen family's story sets the stage for Katniss's story within the trilogy?

SC: Her parents have their own histories in District 12 but I only included what's pertinent to Katniss's tale. Her father's hunting skills, musicality, and death in the mines. Her mother's healing talent and vulnerabilities. Her deep love for Prim. Those are the elements that seemed essential to me.

DL: This completely fascinates me because I, as an author, rarely know more (consciously) about the characters than what's in the story. But this sounds like you know much more about the Everdeen parents than found their way to the page. What are some of the more interesting things about them that a reader wouldn't necessarily know?

SC: Your way sounds a lot more efficient. I have a world of information about the characters that didn't make it into the book. With some stories, revealing that could be illuminating, but in the case of *The Hunger Games*, I think it would only be a distraction unless it was part of a new tale within the world of Panem.

DL: I have to ask — did you know from the start how Prim's story was going to end? (I can't imagine writing the reaping scene while knowing — but at the same time I can't imagine writing it without knowing.)

SC: You almost have to know it and not know it at the same time to write it convincingly, because the dramatic question, *Can Katniss save Prim*?, is introduced in the first chapter of the first book, and not answered until almost the end of the trilogy. At first there's the relief that, yes, she can volunteer for Prim. Then Rue, who reminds her of Prim, joins her in the arena and she can't save her. That tragedy refreshes the question. For most of the second book, Prim's largely out of harm's way, although there's always the threat that the Capitol might hurt her to hurt Katniss. The jabberjays are a reminder of

that. Once she's in District 13 and the war has shifted to the Capitol, Katniss begins to hope Prim's not only safe but has a bright future as a doctor. But it's an illusion. The danger that made Prim vulnerable in the beginning, the threat of the arena, still exists. In the first book, it's a venue for the Games; in the second, the platform for the revolution; in the third, it's the battleground of Panem, coming to a head in the Capitol. The arena transforms but it's never eradicated; in fact it's expanded to include everyone in the country. Can Katniss save Prim? No. Because no one is safe while the arena exists.

DL: If Katniss was the first character to make herself known within story, when did Peeta and Gale come into the equation? Did you know from the beginning how their stories would play out vis-à-vis Katniss's?

SC: Peeta and Gale appeared quickly, less as two points on a love triangle, more as two perspectives in the just war debate. Gale, because of his experiences and temperament, tends toward violent remedies. Peeta's natural inclination is toward diplomacy. Katniss isn't just deciding on a partner; she's figuring out her worldview.

DL: And did you always know which worldview would win? It's interesting to see it presented in such a clear-cut way, because when I think of Katniss, I certainly think of force over diplomacy.

SC: And yet Katniss isn't someone eager to engage in violence and she takes no pleasure in it. Her circumstances repeatedly push her into making choices that include the use of force. But if you look carefully at what happens in the arena, her compassionate choices determine her survival. Taking on Rue as an ally results in Thresh sparing her life. Seeking out Peeta and caring for

him when she discovers how badly wounded he is ultimately leads to her winning the Games. She uses force only in self-defense or defense of a third party, and I'm including Cato's mercy killing in that. As the trilogy progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the use of force because the overall violence is escalating with the war. The how and the why become harder to answer.

Yes, I knew which worldview would win, but in the interest of examining just war theory you need to make the arguments as strongly as possible on both sides. While Katniss ultimately chooses Peeta, remember that in order to end the Hunger Games her last act is to assassinate an unarmed woman. Conversely, in The Underland Chronicles, Gregor's last act is to break his sword to interrupt the cycle of violence. The point of both stories is to take the reader through the journey, have them confront the issues with the protagonist, and then hopefully inspire them to think about it and discuss it. What would they do in Katniss's or Gregor's situation? How would they define a just or unjust war and what behavior is acceptable within warfare? What are the human costs of life, limb, and sanity? How does developing technology impact the debate? The hope is that better discussions might lead to more nonviolent forms of conflict resolution, so we evolve out of choosing war as an option.

DL: Where does Haymitch fit into this examination of war? What worldview does he bring?

SC: Haymitch was badly damaged in his own war, the second Quarter Quell, in which he witnessed and participated in terrible things in order to survive and then saw his loved ones killed for his strategy. He self-medicates with white

liquor to combat severe PTSD. His chances of recovery are compromised because he's forced to mentor the tributes every year. He's a version of what Katniss might become, if the Hunger Games continues. Peeta comments on how similar they are, and it's true. They both really struggle with their worldview. He manages to defuse the escalating violence at Gale's whipping with words, but he participates in a plot to bring down the government that will entail a civil war.

The ray of light that penetrates that very dark cloud in his brain is the moment that Katniss volunteers for Prim. He sees, as do many people in Panem, the power of her sacrifice. And when that carries into her Games, with Rue and Peeta, he slowly begins to believe that with Katniss it might be possible to end the Hunger Games.

DL: I'm also curious about how you balanced the personal and political in drawing the relationship between Katniss and Gale. They have such a history together — and I think you powerfully show the conflict that arises when you love someone, but don't love what they believe in. (I think that resonates particularly now, when so many families and relationships and friendships have been disrupted by politics.)

SC: Yes, I think it's painful, especially because they feel so in tune in so many ways. Katniss's and Gale's differences of opinion are based in just war theory. Do we revolt? How do we conduct ourselves in the war? And the ethical and personal lines climax at the same moment — the double tap bombing that takes Prim's life. But it's rarely simple; there are a lot of gray areas. It's complicated by Peeta often holding a conflicting view while being the rival for her heart, so the emotional pull and the ethical pull become so intertwined

it's impossible to separate them. What do you do when someone you love, someone you know to be a good person, has a view which completely opposes your own? You keep trying to understand what led to the difference and see if it can be bridged. Maybe, maybe not. I think many conflicts grow out of fear, and in an attempt to counter that fear, people reach for solutions that may be comforting in the short term, but only increase their vulnerability in the long run and cause a lot of destruction along the way.

DL: In drawing Gale's and Peeta's roles in the story, how conscious were you of the gender inversion from traditional narrative tropes? As you note above, both are important far beyond any romantic subplot, but I do think there's something fascinating about the way they both reinscribe roles that would traditionally be that of the "girlfriend." Gale in particular gets to be "the girl back home" from so many Westerns and adventure movies — but of course is so much more than that. And Peeta, while a very strong character in his own right, often has to take a backseat to Katniss and her strategy, both in and out of the arena. Did you think about them in terms of gender and tropes, or did that just come naturally as the characters did what they were going to do on the page?

SC: It came naturally because, while Gale and Peeta are very important characters, it's Katniss's story.

DL: For Peeta . . . why baking?

SC: Bread crops up a lot in *The Hunger Games*. It's the main food source in the districts, as it was for many people historically. When Peeta throws a starving Katniss bread in the flashback, he's keeping her alive long enough to work out

a strategy for survival. It seemed in keeping with his character to be a baker, a life giver.

But there's a dark side to bread, too. When Plutarch Heavensbee references it, he's talking about Panem et Circenses, Bread and Circuses, where food and entertainment lull people into relinquishing their political power. Bread can contribute to life or death in the Hunger Games.

DL: Speaking of Plutarch — in a meta way, the two of you share a job (although when you do it, only fictional people die). When you were designing the arena for the first book, what influences came into play? Did you design the arena and then have the participants react to it, or did you design the arena with specific reactions and plot points in mind?

SC: Katniss has a lot going against her in the first arena — she's inexperienced, smaller than a lot of her competitors, and hasn't the training of the Careers — so the arena needed to be in her favor. The landscape closely resembles the woods around District 12, with similar flora and fauna. She can feed herself and recognize the nightlock as poisonous. Thematically, the Girl on Fire needed to encounter fire at some point, so I built that in. I didn't want it too physically flashy, because the audience needs to focus on the human dynamic, the plight of the star-crossed lovers, the alliance with Rue, the twist that two tributes can survive from the same district. Also, the Gamemakers would want to leave room for a noticeable elevation in spectacle when the Games move to the Quarter Quell arena in *Catching Fire* with the more intricate clock design.

DL: So where does Plutarch fall into the just war spectrum? There are many layers to his involvement in what's going on.

SC: Plutarch is the namesake of the biographer Plutarch, and he's one of the few characters who has a sense of the arc of history. He's never lived in a world without the Hunger Games; it was well established by the time he was born and then he rose through the ranks to become Head Gamemaker. At some point, he's gone from accepting that the Games are necessary to deciding they're unnecessary, and he sets about ending them. Plutarch has a personal agenda as well. He's seen so many of his peers killed off, like Seneca Crane, that he wonders how long it will be before the mad king decides he's a threat not an asset. It's no way to live. And as a gamemaker among gamemakers, he likes the challenge of the revolution. But even after they succeed he questions how long the resulting peace will last. He has a fairly low opinion of human beings, but ultimately doesn't rule out that they might be able to change.

DL: When it comes to larger world building, how much did you know about Panem before you started writing? If I had asked you, while you were writing the opening pages, "Suzanne, what's the primary industry of District Five?" would you have known the answer, or did those details emerge to you when they emerged within the writing of the story?

SC: Before I started writing I knew there were thirteen districts — that's a nod to the thirteen colonies — and that they'd each be known for a specific industry. I knew 12 would be coal and most of the others were set, but I had a few blanks that naturally filled in as the story evolved. When I was little we had that board game, Game of the States, where each state was identified by its exports. And even today we associate different locations in the country with a product, with seafood or wine or tech. Of course, it's a very simplified take on Panem. No district exists entirely by its designated trade. But for purposes of the Hunger Games, it's another way to divide and define the districts.

DL: How do you think being from District 12 defines Katniss, Peeta, and Gale? Could they have been from any other district, or is their residency in 12 formative for the parts of their personalities that drive the story?

SC: Very formative. District 12 is the joke district, small and poor, rarely producing a victor in the Hunger Games. As a result, the Capitol largely ignores it. The enforcement of the laws is lax, the relationship with the Peacekeepers less hostile. This allows the kids to grow up far less constrained than in other districts. Katniss and Gale become talented archers by slipping off in the woods to hunt. That possibility of training with a weapon is unthinkable in, say, District 11, with its oppressive military presence. Finnick's trident and Johanna's ax skills develop as part of their districts' industries, but they would never be allowed access to those weapons outside of work. Also, Katniss, Peeta, and Gale view the Capitol in a different manner by virtue of knowing their Peacekeepers better. Darius, in the Hob, is considered a friend, and he proves himself to be so more than once. This makes the Capitol more approachable on a level, more possible to befriend, and more possible to defeat. More human.

DL: Let's talk about the Capitol for a moment — particularly its most powerful resident. I know that every name you give a character is deliberate, so why President *Snow*?

SC: Snow because of its coldness and purity. That's purity of thought, although most people would consider it pure evil. His methods are monstrous, but in his mind, he's all that's holding Panem together. His first name, Coriolanus, is a nod to the titular character in Shakespeare's play who was based on material from *Plutarch's Lives*. He was known for his anti-populist sentiments, and

Snow is definitely not a man of the people.

DL: The bond between Katniss and Snow is one of the most interesting in the entire series. Because even when they are in opposition, there seems to be an understanding between them that few if any of the other characters in the trilogy share. What role do you feel Snow plays for Katniss — and how does this fit into your examination of war?

SC: On the surface, she's the face of the rebels, he's the face of the Capitol. Underneath, things are a lot more complicated. Snow's quite old under all that plastic surgery. Without saying too much, he's been waiting for Katniss for a long time. She's the worthy opponent who will test the strength of his citadel, of his life's work. He's the embodiment of evil to her, with the power of life and death. They're obsessed with each other to the point of being blinded to the larger picture. "I was watching you, Mockingjay. And you were watching me. I'm afraid we have both been played for fools." By Coin, that is. And then their unholy alliance at the end brings her down.

DL: One of the things that both Snow and Katniss realize is the power of media and imagery on the population. Snow may appear heartless to some, but he is very attuned to the "hearts and minds" of his citizens . . . and he is also attuned to the danger of losing them to Katniss. What role do you see propaganda playing in the war they're waging?

SC: Propaganda decides the outcome of the war. This is why Plutarch implements the airtime assault; he understands that whoever controls the airwaves controls the power. Like Snow, he's been waiting for Katniss, because he needs a Spartacus to lead his campaign. There have been possible

candidates, like Finnick, but no one else has captured the imagination of the country like she has.

DL: In terms of the revolution, appearance matters — and two of the characters who seem to understand this the most are Cinna and Caesar Flickerman, one in a principled way, one . . . not as principled. How did you draw these two characters into your themes?

SC: That's exactly right. Cinna uses his artistic gifts to woo the crowd with spectacle and beauty. Even after his death, his Mockingjay costume designs are used in the revolution. Caesar, whose job is to maintain the myth of the glorious games, transitions into warfare with the prisoner of war interviews with Peeta. They are both helping to keep up appearances.

DL: As a writer, you studiously avoided the trope of harkening back to the "old" geography — i.e., there isn't a character who says, "This was once a land known as . . . Delaware." (And thank goodness for that.) Why did you decide to avoid pinning down Panem to our contemporary geography?

SC: The geography has changed because of natural and man-made disasters, so it's not as simple as overlaying a current map on Panem. But more importantly, it's not relevant to the story. Telling the reader the continent gives them the layout in general, but borders are very changeful. Look at how the map of North America has evolved in the past 300 years. It makes little difference to Katniss what we called Panem in the past.

DL: Let's talk about the *D* word. When you sat down to write *The Hunger Games*, did you think of it as a dystopian novel?

SC: I thought of it as a war story. I love dystopia, but it will always be secondary to that. Setting the trilogy in a futuristic North America makes it familiar enough to relate to but just different enough to gain some perspective. When people ask me how far in the future it's set, I say, "It depends on how optimistic you are."

DL: What do you think it was about the world into which the book was published that made it viewed so prominently as a dystopia?

SC: In the same way most people would define The Underland Chronicles as a fantasy series, they would define The Hunger Games as a dystopian trilogy, and they'd be right. The elements of the genres are there in both cases. But they're first and foremost war stories to me. The thing is, whether you came for the war, dystopia, action adventure, propaganda, coming of age, or romance, I'm happy you're reading it. Everyone brings their own experiences to the book that will color how they interpret it. I imagine the number of people who immediately identify it as a just war theory story are in the minority, but most stories are more than one thing.

DL: What was the relationship between current events and the world you were drawing? I know that with many speculative writers, they see something in the news and find it filtering into their fictional world. Were you reacting to the world around you, or was your reaction more grounded in a more timeless and/or historical consideration of war?

SC: I would say the latter. Some authors — okay, you for instance — can digest events quickly and channel them into their writing, as you did so effectively with September 11 in *Love Is the Higher Law*. But I don't process

and integrate things rapidly, so history works better for me.

DL: There's nothing I like more than talking to writers about writing — so I'd love to ask about your *process* (even though I've always found the word process to be far too orderly to describe how a writer's mind works).

As I recall, when we at Scholastic first saw the proposal for The Hunger Games Trilogy, the summary of the first book was substantial, the summary for the second book was significantly shorter, and the summary of the third book was . . . remarkably brief. So, first question: Did you stick to that early outline?

SC: I had to go back and take a look. Yes, I stuck to it very closely, but as you point out, the third book summary is remarkably brief. I basically tell you there's a war that the Capitol eventually loses. Just coming off The Underland Chronicles, which also ends with a war, I think I'd seen how much develops along the way and wanted that freedom for this series as well.

DL: Would you outline books two and three as you were writing book one? Or would you just take notes for later? Was this the same or different from what you did with The Underland Chronicles?

SC: Structure's one of my favorite parts of writing. I always work a story out with Post-its, sometimes using different colors for different character arcs. I create a chapter grid, as well, and keep files for later books, so that whenever I have an idea that might be useful, I can make a note of it. I wrote scripts for many years before I tried books, so a lot of my writing habits developed through that experience.

DL: Would you deliberately plant things in book one to bloom in books two or three? Are there any seeds you planted in the first book that you ended up not growing?

SC: Oh, yes, I definitely planted things. For instance, Johanna Mason is mentioned in the third chapter of the first book although she won't appear until *Catching Fire*. Plutarch is that unnamed gamemaker who falls into the punch bowl when she shoots the arrow. Peeta whispers "Always" in *Catching Fire* when Katniss is under the influence of sleep syrup but she doesn't hear the word until after she's been shot in *Mockingjay*. Sometimes you just don't have time to let all the seeds grow, or you cut them out because they don't really add to the story. Like those wild dogs that roam around District 12. One could potentially have been tamed, but Buttercup stole their thunder.

DL: Since much of your early experience as a writer was as a playwright, I'm curious: What did you learn as a playwright that helped you as a novelist?

SC: I studied theater for many years — first acting, then playwriting — and I have a particular love for classical theater. I formed my ideas about structure as a playwright, how crucial it is and how, when it's done well, it's really inseparable from character. It's like a living thing to me. I also wrote for children's television for seventeen years. I learned a lot writing for preschool. If a three-year-old doesn't like something, they just get up and walk away from the set. I saw my own kids do that. How do you hold their attention? It's hard and the internet has made it harder. So for the eight novels, I developed a three-act structure, with each act being composed of nine chapters, using elements from both play and screenplay structures — double layering it, so to speak.

DL: Where do you write? Are you a longhand writer or a laptop writer? Do you listen to music as you write, or go for the monastic, writerly silence?

SC: I write best at home in a recliner. I used to write longhand, but now it's all laptop. Definitely not music; it demands to be listened to. I like quiet, but not silence.

DL: You talked earlier about researching survival training and edible plants for these books. What other research did you have to do? Are you a reading researcher, a hands-on researcher, or a mix of both? (I'm imagining an elaborate archery complex in your backyard, but I am guessing that's not necessarily accurate.)

SC: You know, I'm just not very handy. I read a lot about how to build a bow from scratch, but I doubt I could ever make one. Being good with your hands is a gift. So I do a lot of book research. Sometimes I visit museums or historic sites for inspiration. I was trained in stage combat, particularly sword fighting in drama school; I have a nice collection of swords designed for that, but that was more helpful for The Underland Chronicles. The only time I got to do archery was in gym class in high school.

DL: While I wish I could say the editorial team (Kate Egan, Jennifer Rees, and myself) were the first-ever readers of *The Hunger Games*, I know this isn't true. When you're writing a book, who reads it first?

SC: My husband, Cap, and my literary agent, Rosemary Stimola, have consistently been the books' first readers. They both have excellent critique skills and give insightful notes. I like to keep the editorial team as much in

the dark as possible, so that when they read the first draft it's with completely fresh eyes.

DL: Looking back now at the editorial conversations we had about *The Hunger Games* — which were primarily with Kate, as Jen and I rode shotgun — can you recall any significant shifts or discussions?

SC: What I mostly recall is how relieved I was to know that I had such amazing people to work with on the book before it entered the world. I had eight novels come out in eight years with Scholastic, so that was fast for me and I needed feedback I could trust. You're all so smart, intuitive, and communicative, and with the three of you, no stone went unturned. With The Hunger Games Trilogy, I really depended on your brains and hearts to catch what worked and what didn't.

DL: And then there was the question of the title . . .

SC: Okay, this I remember clearly. The original title of the first book was *The Tribute of District Twelve*. You wanted to change it to *The Hunger Games*, which was my name for the series. I said, "Okay, but I'm not thinking of another name for the series!" To this day, more people ask me about "the Gregor series" than "The Underland Chronicles," and I didn't want a repeat of that because it's confusing. But you were right, *The Hunger Games* was a much better name for the book. *Catching Fire* was originally called *The Ripple Effect* and I wanted to change that one, because it was too watery for a Girl on Fire, so we came up with *Catching Fire*. The third book I'd come up with a title so bad I can't even remember it except it had the word ashes in it. We both hated it. One day, you said, "What if we just call it *Mockingjay*?" And that seemed

perfect. The three parts of the book had been subtitled "The Mockingjay," "The Assault," and "The Assassin." We changed the title to *Mockingjay* and the first part to "The Ashes" and got that lovely alliteration in the subtitles. Thank goodness you were there; you have far better taste in titles. I believe in the acknowledgments, I call you the Title Master.

DL: With *The Hunger Games*, the choice of *Games* is natural — but the choice of *Hunger* is much more odd and interesting. So I'll ask: Why *Hunger Games*?

SC: Because food is a lethal weapon. Withholding food, that is. Just like it is in *Boris* when the Nazis starve out the people of Leningrad. It's a weapon that targets everyone in a war, not just the soldiers in combat, but the civilians too. In the prologue of *Henry V*, the Chorus talks about Harry as Mars, the god of war. "And at his heels, Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword, and fire crouch for employment." Famine, sword, and fire are his dogs of war, and famine leads the pack. With a rising global population and environmental issues, I think food could be a significant weapon in the future.

DL: The cover was another huge effort. We easily had over a hundred different covers comped up before we landed on the iconic one. There were some covers that pictured Katniss — something I can't imagine doing now. And there were others that tried to picture scenes. Of course, the answer was in front of us the entire time — the Mockingjay symbol, which the art director Elizabeth Parisi deployed to such amazing effect. What do you think of the impact the cover and the symbol have had? What were your thoughts when you saw this cover?

SC: Oh, it's a brilliant cover, which I should point out I had nothing to do with. I only saw a handful of the many you developed. The one that made it

to print is absolutely fantastic; I loved it at first sight. It's classy, powerful, and utterly unique to the story. It doesn't limit the age of the audience and I think that really contributed to adults feeling comfortable reading it. And then, of course, you followed it up with the wonderful evolution of the mockingjay throughout the series. There's something universal about the imagery, the captive bird gaining freedom, which I think is why so many of the foreign publishers chose to use it instead of designing their own. And it translated beautifully to the screen where it still holds as the central symbolic image for the franchise.

DL: Obviously, the four movies had an enormous impact on how widely the story spread across the globe. The whole movie process started with the producers coming on board. What made you know they were the right people to shepherd this story into another form?

SC: When I decided to sell the entertainment rights to the book, I had phone interviews with over a dozen producers. Nina Jacobson's understanding of and passion for the piece along with her commitment to protecting it won me over. She's so articulate, I knew she'd be an excellent person to usher it into the world. The team at Lionsgate's enthusiasm and insight made a deep impression as well. I needed partners with the courage not to shy away from the difficult elements of the piece, ones who wouldn't try to steer the story to an easier, more traditional ending. Prim can't live. The victory can't be joyous. The wounds have to leave lasting scars. It's not an easy ending but it's an intentional one.

DL: You cowrote the screenplay for the first *Hunger Games* movie. I know it's an enormously tricky thing for an author to adapt their own work. How did

you approach it? What was the hardest thing about translating a novel into a screenplay? What was the most rewarding?

SC: I wrote the initial treatments and first draft and then Billy Ray came on for several drafts and then our director, Gary Ross, developed it into his shooting script and we ultimately did a couple of passes together. I did the boil down of the book, which is a lot of cutting things while trying to retain the dramatic structure. I think the hardest thing for me, because I'm not a terribly visual person, was finding the way to translate many words into few images. Billy and Gary, both far more experienced screenwriters and gifted directors as well, really excelled at that. Throughout the franchise I had terrific screenwriters, and Francis Lawrence, who directed the last three films, is an incredible visual storyteller.

The most rewarding moment on the *Hunger Games* movie would have been the first time I saw it put together, still in rough form, and thinking it worked.

DL: One of the strange things for me about having a novel adapted is knowing that the actors involved will become, in many people's minds, the faces and bodies of the characters who have heretofore lived as bodiless voices in my head. Which I suppose leads to a three-part question: Do you picture your characters as you're writing them? If so, how close did Jennifer Lawrence come to the Katniss in your head? And now when you think about Katniss, do you see Jennifer or do you still see what you imagined before?

SC: I definitely do picture the characters when I'm writing them. The actress who looks exactly like my book Katniss doesn't exist. Jennifer looked close

enough and felt very right, which is more important. She gives an amazing performance. When I think of the books, I still think of my initial image of Katniss. When I think of the movies, I think of Jen. Those images aren't at war any more than the books are with the films. Because they're faithful adaptations, the story becomes the primary thing. Some people will never read a book, but they might see the same story in a movie. When it works well, the two entities support and enrich each other.

DL: All of the actors did such a fantastic job with your characters (truly). Are there any in particular that have stayed with you?

SC: A writer friend of mine once said, "Your cast — they're like a basket of diamonds." That's how I think of them. I feel fortunate to have had such a talented team — directors, producers, screenwriters, performers, designers, editors, marketing, publicity, everybody — to make the journey with. And I'm so grateful for the readers and viewers who invested in The Hunger Games. Stories are made to be shared.

DL: We're talking on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of *The Hunger Games*. Looking back at the past ten years, what have some of the highlights been?

SC: The response from the readers, especially the young audience for which it was written. Seeing beautiful and faithful adaptations reach the screen. Occasionally hearing it make its way into public discourse on politics or social issues.

DL: The Hunger Games Trilogy has been an international bestseller. Why do

you think this series struck such an important chord throughout the world?

SC: Possibly because the themes are universal. War is a magnet for difficult issues. In *The Hunger Games*, you have vast inequality of wealth, destruction of the planet, political struggles, war as a media event, human rights abuses, propaganda, and a whole lot of other elements that affect human beings wherever they live. I think the story might tap into the anxiety a lot of people feel about the future right now.

DL: As we celebrate the past ten years and look forward to many decades to come for this trilogy, I'd love for us to end where we should — with the millions of readers who've embraced these books. What words would you like to leave them with?

SC: Thank you for joining Katniss on her journey. And may the odds be ever in your favor.

IN 2013, acclaimed authors Walter Dean Myers (d.2014) and Suzanne Collins came to the Scholastic Auditorium for a conversation about writing war stories for readers of all ages. The following is an edited transcript of this illuminating conversation, which was introduced by Walter Dean Myers's editor, Andrea Davis Pinkney, and moderated by David Levithan.

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY: We're here to talk about a topic that can be very unsettling, and that is the topic of war. And we're going to explore the complexities of war through the work and wisdom of two great literary thinkers:

Suzanne Collins, author of the groundbreaking Hunger Games Trilogy and the bestselling Underland Chronicles, breaks ground again, looking at war in her extraordinary new picture book entitled *Year of the Jungle*, which is illustrated by James Proimos.

Walter Dean Myers, the 2012–2013 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and a critically acclaimed bestselling author of more than a hundred books for children and young adults, delves into war in his new novel, *Invasion*, the companion to his classic war novels *Fallen Angels* and *Sunrise Over Fallujah*.

DAVID LEVITHAN: Walter, *Invasion* is the extraordinary prequel to two classic war novels, *Fallen Angels*, which is about Vietnam, and *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, which is about Iraq. What made you want to write a prequel, and what did you decide to write about?

WALTER DEAN MYERS: Well, most of my life there's been some kind of a war going on. When I was a kid, it was Vietnam. I went up to join the army on my seventeenth birthday, you know? Because I thought it was a good idea and I had these romantic ideas about war.

Then my brother came in and he was killed in Vietnam. And then with Iraq, my son was in Iraq . . . and every day you're worried. Every time the phone rings at night, you're worried about this. But I kept seeing these romanticized versions of war; I kept seeing war being displayed as distant from the humanity that was actually fighting in the wars.

And so I can't go away from it. My interest is there. I want to look at war in a very realistic sense, and I think that young people need to do this because young people who read *Fallen Angels* are the generation that's now making the decisions about modern wars. We need to bring them to that concept of, *Yes*, *I know something about war*, *and it's about the human costs*.

DL: So you decided to focus on Normandy and World War II.

WDM: The idea of Normandy has been, *It was a bad day*, *but we won*, *and we got to the beaches*, *and we won*. Many of the people that I interviewed recounted that. But there were bad days that followed.

I mean it took the Americans and the Canadians and the Brits twenty-five days to go twenty-five miles, and at a terrible, terrible cost.

DL: How was writing about World War II different than writing about Vietnam or the Iraq War?

WDM: I was a child. War meant the bad guys were someplace, doing something. But for me one of the differences was that I married a German lady, and I began listening to her relatives, what they were saying about how they got into the army, and what it meant to face the Americans.

And that was so human. So human.

DL: One of the amazing things about the book is the detail and how you really feel like you were there, not just on the beach, but as you said, in that month afterward, and sloughing through.

And you do even have a moment — one of my favorite scenes in the book — where you're really seeing it from the German point of view as well, through the interrogation of a prisoner. So I'm curious about the research you did to sort of get into the heads of these soldiers.

WDM: Well, the research was different with this book, because with the Vietnam book, that was my war, I was in the army during that time — with the Iraq thing, my son was there, and I could talk to men. But for this book, I'm interviewing guys in their eighties, and I normally like to interview people three times.

The first time is to sort of get their minds going; the second time, digging a little deeper. And so there were guys I'm talking to with this book, in their late eighties, crying to me, actually crying as they live, relive those memories.

DL: Suzanne, your research for *Year of the Jungle* was obviously of a more personal nature, since you had to go back to your six-year-old self as well as your family to explore the year your father was deployed to Vietnam. What was that like, to excavate that part of your past?

SC: Well, a few weeks ago Jim [illustrator James Proimos] and I were doing some short book trailers for this, and the director sent a list with a breakdown, and he said, "This is the part where Suzanne will show the artifacts," and what he meant was things from my childhood. It made me feel like a mummy or something. But then I thought, No, it was forty-five years ago, and especially for a child, it might as well be five thousand years ago. It is a thing now set in history, even though it was part of my early childhood.

Because that year was so emotional and so intense, even common objects took on a different kind of significance. So I have a thermos I mentioned in the book, which is like a Junior Miss thermos from 1968. And I have a beautiful Vietnamese doll that my dad sent me, as well as the postcards he sent.

In terms of interviews I called my brother and sisters and my mom. I'd been very little during the time, but they shared certain memories with me as well.

So that was really my research. Unlike some other books, in which I do

delve into historic research to use it as models for certain parts in the series, this was all very personal.

DL: Walter, you were talking before about how you enlisted when you were seventeen. Your brother died in Vietnam, your son was in the army. How does that affect how you write about war?

WDM: Well, you know, it has an amazing effect because what I see as I look at war, I see the numbers of people being killed. My son that was in Iraq was a trauma counselor, and he would tell me stories about these men going through this trauma. While they were in the army and while they were out of the army.

And I'm saying, why am I not getting this on the news? Why this distance between what was going on in the lives of the people, the humanity of the people, and what I'm picking up every day in the news? And this just bothers me, it eats at me. And I don't want this idea to continue.

You know, I'm seeing it more and more. I'm seeing, during the Iraq War, we first got the idea of smart bombs. A bomb's not smart; it kills people. *It kills people*. War's about killing people, killing strangers, killing people you're not angry with.

But smart bombs sounds like, "Oh, this is a smart bomb; this is only going to hit the bad guy. You know, the bad guy's going to be having a beer; bam, it's gonna get him." Now we're talking about cyber war.

It makes it sound like a game. Or we're talking about drones. Drones kill

people. And as young people are given these ideas — "Oh, it's a drone, it's a cyber war, you go to your computer, you do this, you do the other thing" — I've seen pictures of guys in I think Florida or someplace like this, and they're shooting off drones in the Middle East, and I'm saying, "What does a kid think about this war? Is it real to them? Is it real?"

I felt driven to make it real. You have to write about war in a way that expresses the humanity of it. You know, we're talking about postcards. That's real, and that's a postcard from a far-off place and represents so much. I have Mass cards, the German soldiers would have when someone in the family was killed, and they'd carry the Mass cards around. That's real.

DL: Suzanne, for you, obviously the through line between growing up in a military family in this book is obvious, but do you think that's really guided you for your other books as well?

SC: Oh yeah. I mean, my father, along with being a Vietnam veteran, was also career Air Force. He was a doctor of political science, and he was a military historian. And when he came back from Vietnam — I'm sure he had been educating us all along — but after he had experienced that war firsthand, he came back, I think, with almost an obsession to educate his children about war.

So from a very early age, he did just that. He told us stories, he took us to battlefields. We went to memorials, and it was all very integrated into our lives. And because of that, because I learned about it so young, I think it seems very natural for me to write about this for children of any age. I don't think that I would have that if I had gone through basically the normal American

education system, where we really ignore a lot of war, and skirt around a lot of things, and wave a patriotic flag about a lot of other things.

You don't really get to the heart or the truth of what's going on. So I think it was an education that was rather unique that led to writing these books about war.

DL: Both of you are fairly unique in that you've now written about war in picture books for young kids, novels for elementary school kids, and then novels for young adults. How do you approach that?

WDM: I just want to remove the romantic notions. You know, I grew up on the romance of war. "Into the valley of death rode the six hundred." You know. [laughs] "I could do that." You know. "Wherever I fall, there lies a bit of England." I read all that stuff and I saw all the movies when I was a kid.

Even today you have the movies wherein you know the good guy is not gonna die, the star is not gonna die, and people get hit in the movies, they fall nicely and they go, "Oh, oh." It's not like that. People scream and yell, and it's horrendous.

So I don't want to have any kid turn against the country because we're involved in wars, but just know what you're getting into.

The same kids who picked up that copy at fifteen of *Fallen Angels* are now forty years old. Lord, time flies. [laughter] But they're the ones who are making the decisions, and they need to know the truth, and they need to learn it early.

DL: I think the wonderful thing about the books is the context that you give. You were talking earlier to us about a letter you got about *Fallen Angels*.

WDM: Nicest letter I've ever received in my life. The Iraq War had broken out, and there was so much flag-waving and gung-ho stuff, and this woman wrote to me and she said that her son wanted to quit school and join the army. She says, "I begged him, I had tears in my eyes. You know, at least finish high school," and he said okay, he'd finish high school, but he was ready to go.

And what he did was he read every war book he could, and he read *Fallen Angels* and he changed his mind. The mother just thanked me and thanked me and thanked me. I'll never see her, but I know she's out there; I know the boy's out there.

SC: Yes. Whether you decide to enlist or not, I think that one of Walter's books should be mandatory reading. You should read one before you go, so that you don't get caught up in a lot of idealism, so you have some sense of what you might be entering.

DL: And in your books, looking at *Year of the Jungle*, then The Underland Chronicles, then *The Hunger Games*, there's a progression —

SC: In *Year of the Jungle*, the main character Suzy is six. In The Underland Chronicles it begins when Gregor's eleven, and in *The Hunger Games* Katniss is sixteen. So you're entering with a protagonist who's the age of the audience, or somewhere in the vicinity.

There's also a sort of philosophical progression about what I'm asking

the audience to think about. If I had to take thirty-five years of my father's war tutelage that I experienced and boil it down into one question, it would involve the issue of whether something is a necessary or an unnecessary war, and the very high bar of being a necessary war. The picture book is a story of the home front, and the main character gets the concept of what a war is. So we begin there.

The Underland Chronicles deals with the concept of an unnecessary war. It's five books. And until you're about into the fourth book, there's no reason the war couldn't be avoided, and it's simply because of anger and greed and hatred and bad decision-making that they're propelled into a necessary war, probably by the time that there's genocide. And then in the fifth book it results in a huge, very bloody Underland global war.

When I got to the YA, I thought, Now is where you begin with a concept of the necessary war, the war which, by our standards today, is accepted. It's said, "If *X*, *Y*, and *Z* happens, then you have just cause to wage war." So at the beginning of *The Hunger Games* you have Panem, a country in which the people are horribly oppressed, and the symbol of this is the Hunger Games, in which these children are forced to fight to the death.

But even that is not that simple, because of the arena, which is a symbol that transforms throughout the three books. In the first book it is simply a gladiator game; in the second it becomes the hotbed of the revolution. And by the third, when they're actually in the war, the arena is the Capitol, and they've come full circle. And all the things that were wrong, that propelled them into the necessary war that were going on in the original arena in *The Hunger Games* are now occurring in *Mockingjay*, except they're happening

on a battlefield. Nothing has, in fact, been resolved. They've just brought themselves full circle, and because they've done that, nobody is safe.

DL: So why write about war? Do you feel that you have a choice? You keep coming back to the subject over and over again. What's the passion behind that?

WDM: I keep coming back to it because we keep going, we keep having wars. As Suzanne was saying, you keep asking yourself, *Is this war necessary*? And, you know, the reason that we have wars is that people make bad decisions, but we allow them to make bad decisions. Nobody wants to stand up and say, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute," and somebody has to do that.

The book community has to do that. Librarians have to do that. We have to say, "Wait a minute." I was looking the other day about the drones; I said, "Oh, this is so bad, this is so bad, because this is going to lead to bad decisions. This is going to lead to the company that makes the drones, they'll be making the decisions, and the people who make the smart bombs will be making decisions," and we need readers, we need people who are thinking, and we need people to say, "Wait a minute."

I spend a lot of time in prisons, juvenile prisons, and one of the things that I always know about juvenile prisons is if the guys had been over the problems before acting, they would've made different decisions. And it's the same thing with wars. If they would go over the problems and understand what's going on, their decisions would be different.

I feel compelled to write about that.

SC: And I think you can say, "Well, there are all these amazing war books that came ahead of you," and it's true, there are, but it seems that the stories need to be refreshed for every generation. You know, because you'll get something like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and it seems like that should've been it, no more war. And it's not so much, I think, that you think you're going to write the book that ends war; it's more that you feel like you're part of a continuum, that the discussion has to be kept on the table.

If not, will we backslide even further? There's a sort of responsibility to keep the subject alive and make it new, and I think writing for younger audiences, you have even more of an opportunity to do that.

DL: Let's talk about the void in other parts of the culture in discussing war. We were talking earlier about just how it is not a topic that's very much on people's minds, and you can easily sort of shunt it away and not pay attention to it.

I think it's interesting that these books really do force you to. Look at how it operates with war and the media —

SC: Right. I mean the initial idea for *The Hunger Games* came when I was channel surfing through television, and there was a reality program, and then there was footage of the Iraq War, although it is not the footage that, you know, you're talking about from Vietnam, because they don't show that kind of footage anymore.

WDM: Right, right.

SC: And then you hit the button again and you're on a cooking show, and then there's a baseball game. We're so inundated with information and with options of things to view right now, it becomes very difficult to distinguish. The footage you saw in Iraq is, for one thing, not entertainment. It's something real and very serious going on, and lives are being lost. But there's a real desensitization to people, because we're so overloaded with imagery.

When I was a child, when *Year of the Jungle* was going on, we had, I think, four channels in black and white. And when the news was on, you knew it was the news; there wasn't any confusion. And there weren't a million other images coming to you from other places.

We've been at war going on twelve years now, and although much lip service is paid to the contrary, there's a really small segment of our population — the military families — who are utterly bearing the brunt of this, and in many ways are very isolated.

I don't feel that we feel as if we're a nation at war, but we should all hold equal responsibility in that. At the time of *Year of the Jungle*, we did not live on a military base; I did not know anybody else that had a parent in Vietnam. In situations like that, you're isolated, and you're going through a very difficult time without support. And of course Vietnam was not a popular war.

WDM: You also have to remember that one of the things that eroded the support for the Vietnam War were the images on television. And after that, the government understood that, and there were not those images for the Iraq War, and there are not those images for today's war, and there's not those

images for all of these young people who are being traumatized.

I know that I was shocked when they had the Paralympics, and all these young people with artificial limbs. We weren't seeing those on television. You know, that story was not being told. Suzanne and I are trying to tell that story.

DL: It's been twenty-five years since *Fallen Angels* came out, and obviously time has passed, it's a different kind of war. So what themes do you find keep recurring and what things do you think are unique for now?

WDM: If you're ever in a war zone and you see bodies, if you smell the bodies, you begin to rethink what war's about. And I really think that the excitement that we try to reach out and generate among very young kids, war games and stuff like this, it goes on and on and on, hiding the horrors of war behind this huge mask, sometimes of patriotism; more recently, just by censorship.

SC: Right. And having a realistic sense and an education about war is essential on so many levels. If you don't even have an idea of what propaganda is, how will you know when it's being used against you? How will you know to question a government, to question the information that's being fed to you? You won't know, because you won't have any background to know that you should have alarms going off when certain things are said.

And then lastly — and Walter alluded to this — the young people of today are the ones that we'll be looking to, hopefully, in the future, to come up with nonviolent means of conflict resolution. If they don't understand conflict, if they don't really understand the nature of war and its cost and what it means and what it's meant historically, if they have no sense of it other than the romanticized movies or whatever they've seen, how can we expect them to

have a clue about how they might come up with solutions for it?

WDM: Yeah.

DL: Well, I, luckily, feel I can end on a note of hope, because I think we can see what literature and stories can do.

I love the fact that the seventeen-year-old who joined the army because of poetry and grandiose notions of war now writes novels that seventeen-year-olds read and decide not to go to war.

And the six-year-old who didn't know what war was, and was just so confused by what was going on, has grown up to write a book for six-year-olds, explaining what's going on. I think there's some beauty in that, and in the hope that we can actually improve things, which I hope we can.

Thank you, Walter and Suzanne.