

March 9, 2012

Peer Pressure? How About, Like, Fighting to Death?

By PAMELA PAUL

HERE'S a pop math quiz: "The Hunger Games," a best-selling novel by Suzanne Collins about children killing children, is recommended for readers 12 and older. The "Hunger Games" movie, which shows kids killing kids, is angling for a PG-13 rating when it hits theaters March 23. To complicate matters, many readers under the age of 12 are dying to see the movie. Meanwhile, Jennifer Lawrence, the film's star, is 21. She got the book at the behest of her mother, a reader and fan.

So who is the audience for "The Hunger Games"? A tense and gritty critique of media culture with violence as entertainment, it could be a movie squarely aimed at grown-ups. Or a family film that works on different levels for older and younger viewers, the way Pixar releases do. Or it could be the next "Twilight," another smash young-adult-novel-to-teen-movie adaptation with a similarly vexing (if less prominent) love triangle.

The open question reflects the book's audience. In recent years a wave of popular young-adult novels has generated a happy convergence of readers who are young, readers who are young adults and readers who are, well, old adults. These best sellers may have caught Hollywood's attention, and led to major deals. (See "Divergent" and "The Fault in Our Stars.") But that doesn't make even a blockbuster like "The Hunger Games," which has sold more than 11 million copies in the United States since it came out in 2008, a sure box office hit.

"There were a lot of ways this could become a movie that didn't honor what the book was about," said one of the film's producers, Nina Jacobson, who described herself as obsessed with the novel, and who optioned "The Hunger Games" immediately after reading it. She made a passionate case to the author, promising to respect the book's fans without pandering to a teenage audience. But Ms. Jacobson assured Ms. Collins she wouldn't dilute the story by aging the characters up or by glamorizing its violence. "I loved the book as an adult," Ms. Jacobson said firmly. "I don't think it's a Y.A. novel."

One possibility might have been to follow the "Harry Potter" model, which succeeded as perhaps the first middle-grade novel to bring in adults to both the reading experience and the movie theater. As Harry and his Hogwarts friends made their way into the upper grades, the stories themselves became darker and more sophisticated — decidedly young adult.

And “The Hunger Games” is very much a young-adult novel. The story takes place in a postapocalyptic version of North America called Panem, where 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen assumes the place of her younger sister in a televised battle to the death known as the Hunger Games. The games are retribution for an earlier rebellion against the Capitol, which starves and represses the 12 remaining districts under its rule. Every year 24 children, a boy and girl from each district, must murder one another until one winner remains, an event relentlessly promoted to the entire nation. The ensuing action is similarly relentless — brutal, bloody and heartbreaking.

Gary Ross, the film’s director, is no stranger to the pressures of major book-to-screen adaptations. He brought both “Seabiscuit,” Laura Hillenbrand’s adult nonfiction book, and “The Tale of Despereaux,” a children’s book by Kate DiCamillo, to film. He also brings rare experience with the book world to Hollywood. As the president of the Los Angeles Public Library in the early 1990s Mr. Ross oversaw a major expansion of its young adult collection. The parent of 16-year-old twins, he is steeped in the genre. And he is an author himself. His first children’s book, what he calls an “epic poem” called “Bartholomew Biddle and the Very Big Wind,” will be published in November.

He argues that “The Hunger Games” both embodies and transcends the young-adult genre. “Because teenagers are on the cusp of adulthood, they’re grappling with a lot of issues that in adult books are resolved but teenagers are still beginning to explore,” he said. “It’s that nascent element that makes ‘The Hunger Games’ feel so urgent. It’s innocent and aspirational and engaging.” And, he argued, it is no less so for an adult than for a teenager.

“I was enthralled,” he said. “Not many books on this scope have the kind of intimacy of ‘The Hunger Games.’ It was subtle but urgent, and Katniss Everdeen was complicated.”

For Ms. Lawrence, the film’s lead, it was the character of Katniss that ultimately convinced her to sign on. Joining a major teenage franchise, after all, carries risks. Like Kristen Stewart pre-“Twilight,” Ms. Lawrence is mostly known for independent films, like “Winter’s Bone,” her breakout. (The most recent installment of the “X-Men” series was a notable exception.)

Committing to a trilogy means turning down other offers, not to mention potentially being typecast and becoming screaming-fan famous, a double-edged sword. This risk is high with “The Hunger Games.” Before the film was even in production, enthusiasts were furiously debating the casting of Katniss, with arguments between backers of Ms. Lawrence and Hailee Steinfeld, the young star of “True Grit,” breaking out across social media platforms. Each casting decision seemed to ignite a fury of online hisses and cheers: Is Peeta (Josh Hutcherson) cute enough? Who should play Effie? (The role ultimately went to Elizabeth Banks.) Is Jennifer Lawrence tough enough for the role?

She wasn’t so sure herself. “This wasn’t one of those parts where I thought, ‘I have to have this,’ because it’s so scary,” Ms. Lawrence admitted by phone from Prague, where she is preparing for a part. “But I thought, ‘If this is going to be the thing I’m most known for, I want it to be something I’m proud of.’ If someone comes up to me and says, ‘Are you Katniss?’ I’m O.K. with that. Because I love this character and this book so much.”

She also worried about what might otherwise happen to Katniss. “I was hoping and praying that if I didn’t play the part, they wouldn’t make her into a bad-ass girl who can kill anyone,” she said. “Because I think it’s a much sadder story. Katniss doesn’t have any time to think. She feels like she can die at any second. She’s vulnerable, and she doesn’t want to have to kill, but she’s also a hero.”

For Ms. Lawrence that central conflict posed “one of the biggest problems” for the movie: “If we protect the audience from the brutality of the story, you lose the impact. You take the heart of it.”

The filmmakers seem to have taken the tack of focusing on the impact of the violence, rather than the violent acts themselves. The drama arises not from what a 14-year-old does with a knife or a blunt object, but with the stunned and terrified ways the other children view those actions. And there is no happy let’s-learn-to-do-magic windup to the darkness they face.

“‘The Hunger Games’ starts where the Harry Potter books end,” explained David Levithan, vice president, publisher and editorial director of the trade publishing division of Scholastic, which puts out both series. “Whereas Harry Potter is about childhood and coming of age and your eyes being opened to the world, in ‘The Hunger Games’ you’re already in this world, and dealing with its inhumanity.”

Mr. Levithan also likens “The Hunger Games” to the 1977 demographic-defying “*Star Wars*,” another teenager-against-the-world (or universe) film. “To say that ‘The Hunger Games’ is a teen movie is like saying ‘Star Wars’ is a teen movie because it involves a teenager,” Mr. Levithan argued. Certainly, the team behind “The Hunger Games” would like that \$775 million analogy.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 25, 2012

An article on March 11 about the transformation of the young-adult novel “The Hunger Games” into a movie misstated the title of another novel that has caught Hollywood’s attention and described its theme incorrectly. The novel, “The Fault in Our Stars” — not “A Fault in Our Stars” — takes place in present-day Indianapolis and does not have a dystopian theme. A correction in this space last Sunday about the title repeated the error about the theme.