



GreatWorks
touring theatre

the **Giver**

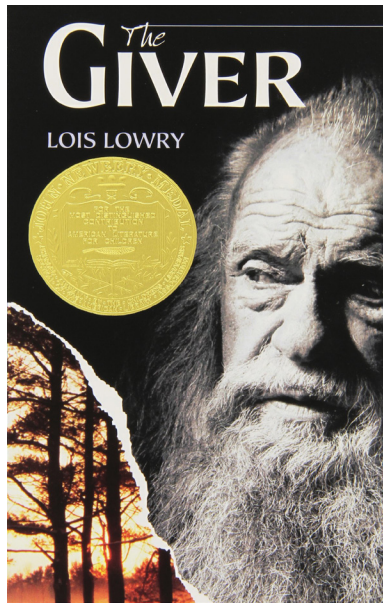
from the novel by Lois Lowry

Study Guide

About THE GIVER

The Giver was first published in 1993, and quickly became one of the most popular books for young readers in a generation. Based in a nameless community where Sameness is the rule and feelings have been bred out of the people, it follows the education of a gifted 12-year-old boy named Jonas as he is trained to be the next “Receiver” in the community - the one individual who will hold on the memories of what life was like before Sameness.

The book won the prestigious Newberry Award for young fiction and has sold over 10 million copies around the world. It has also caused controversy, being one of the books most requested by certain individuals to be banned from school libraries and class-



About THE AUTHOR

Lois Ann Hammersberg was born in 1937 in Honolulu, Hawaii. She was an introverted and shy child who loved to read and decided around 8 or 9 years old that she wanted to be a writer. Lois graduated high school in New York City and went on to study at Brown University. Lois only spent two years at Brown and at age 19 she dropped out of school to marry Donald Lowry, with whom she had four children: Alix, Kristin, Grey, and Ben.



In the early 1970s Lois completed her bachelors degree from the University of Southern Maine. Her first Novel A Summer to Die, was based on Lois’ experience of losing her older sister Helen during childhood. Two years later, Lois developed and launched her series of novels featuring Anastasia Krupnik. In 1989 Lois was awarded with her first Newberry award for her book Number the Stars. Lois later received a second Newberry award for The Giver in 1993.

About GREATWORKS THEATRE & this Study Guide

GreatWorks is a Chicago-based company that produces a roster of literary adaptations and historical plays for audiences K through 8th grade. GreatWorks performs in venues across the United States, with tens of thousands of students seeing a GreatWorks show every school year.

In this guide, we’ll lay out some of the questions that we feel the original book and this stage adaptation raise, ones that we believe you can use to challenge your students to think deeply about the world of the novel as it relates to the world they see around them today. Because this play and this study guide is aimed at students 5th grade and above, we will focus on larger, more sophisticated areas of discussion rather than games or puzzles, but each of the following discussion topics is designed to encourage your students to think ‘beyond’, in the terms of The Giver, and look for greater resonances in the book toward their lives today.

The Beginnings of THE GIVER

Lois Lowry describes the origins of The Giver as a river that began back when she was eleven years old. At the time, her family lived in Tokyo, Japan, where her father was stationed after World War II. They lived in a small American community there. The way Lowry describes it, the fenced-off community shared some traits with the community in which Jonas lives: It was comfortable, familiar, and safe.

But, like Jonas after he begins receiving memories, Lowry did not want comfortable, familiar, and safe. Day after day, she rode her bicycle out of the gate that closed off her community. She would ride to an area of Tokyo called Shibuya. Lowry says she loved the feel of the place, “the vigor and the garish brightness and the noise: all such a contrast to my own life.” For Lowry, Shibuya was Elsewhere.

She added memories from when she was a freshman in college and lived in a small dorm of fourteen young women. Thirteen of the women—Lowry included—were very much alike. They dressed alike, they acted alike. But the fourteenth woman was different. Lowry remembers that she and her roommates didn’t “tease or torment” the woman who was different, but did “something worse”: They ignored her, pretending that she didn’t exist. “Somehow by shutting her out, we make ourselves feel comfortable. Familiar. Safe,” Lowry says.

These memories, as well as the remorseful thoughts that followed, flowed into the river. The river rose when Lowry was sent by a magazine editor to interview a painter who lived alone off the coast of Maine. She and the man talked a lot about color. “It is clear to me that although I am a highly visual person—a person who sees and appreciates form and composition and color—this man’s capacity for seeing color goes far beyond mine,” Lowry says. She adds that she wished “that he could have somehow magically given me the capacity to see the way he did.”

Lowry photographed the man and kept a copy of the photograph, because there was something about his eyes that haunted her. (This photograph is now on the cover of The Giver.) The artist later went blind, though he said he could still see flowers in his memory. “Doesn’t that make you think of The Giver?” Lowry asks.

Over the years, many more memories, thoughts, and ideas were added to the river. There was the time she heard of a crazed killer and felt relieved that he was not in her own neighborhood—then, moments later, felt ashamed to feel such relief. “How safe I deluded myself into feeling,” she says, “by reducing my own realm of caring to my own familiar neighborhood.”

Lowry’s experiences with her elderly parents also added to the river that would become The Giver. “Both of my parents were dying when I wrote the book,” Lowry says. “So the topic of memories and the transfer of memories from one generation to the next was very much on my mind.”

Lowry says that though her mother was quite ill, “her mind was intact. She wanted to tell me the stories of her past . . . it was her life she wanted to pass along.”

But her father was losing his memories. During one visit, he pointed to a picture of Lois’s older sister, Helen, who had died of cancer when she was just twenty-eight years old. “That’s Helen,” he’d said. “I can’t remember exactly what happened to her.”

And Lowry thought, We can forget pain. . . . And it is comfortable to do so. But...is it safe to do that, to forget? It was from this river of memories, thoughts, and ideas that Lois Lowry wrote The Giver.





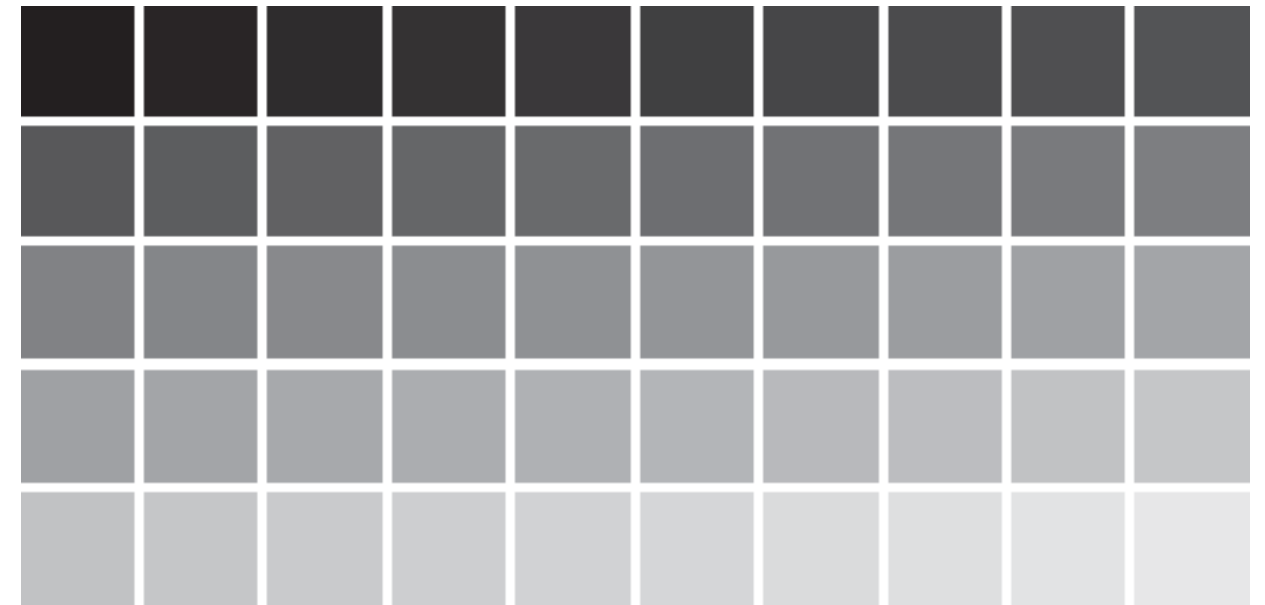
Discussion One : UTOPIA vs DYSTOPIA

The Community in THE GIVER is one that has worked to remove feelings from their every day lives in the effort to find something of a “utopia” for themselves. Their belief is that by removing the feelings of sadness, inadequacy, and want from their community, they can find a way towards a world in which everyone is equal in their relative happiness.

But Jonas discovers that in fact, the community is a form of “dystopia”, where the power of the community’s leaders is such that life is actually considered expendable, and that Sameness is a tool used to keep the people in check rather than empowering them.

Throughout modern times, countries and communities have been created in the effort to provide “utopian’ ideals, but in almost every case, the utopian ideal changes to one in which a few people dictate to everyone else how to live their lives.

- Why does this happen? What is it about the effort to create perfect, harmony-filled communities that seems to always lead to dystopian reality?
- What other examples of films or books can your students name that take place in dystopian communities?
- Is it really possible to have a Utopian community? What would that look like for each individual student, and what would they do to keep dystopia from happening?



Discussion Two : SYMBOLISM IN THE GIVER

Throughout the book and the play, everyday items (or the characteristics OF those items) take on additional importance as symbols or metaphors for the constraints of Jonas’ community (vocab: time out - what is a “metaphor”?).

In Jonas’ awakening to the old world in the time before Sameness, one of the most shocking things to him is the discovery of “color” - in particular, the color red.

- Why red? Why do you think the author chose that color as the one that struck Jonas?
- What other items in the original story or in the stage production might be there for their symbolic or metaphoric meaning?
- Are there choices that the director, designers, or actors made in the stage production that you felt were themselves symbolic of something specific to the story?

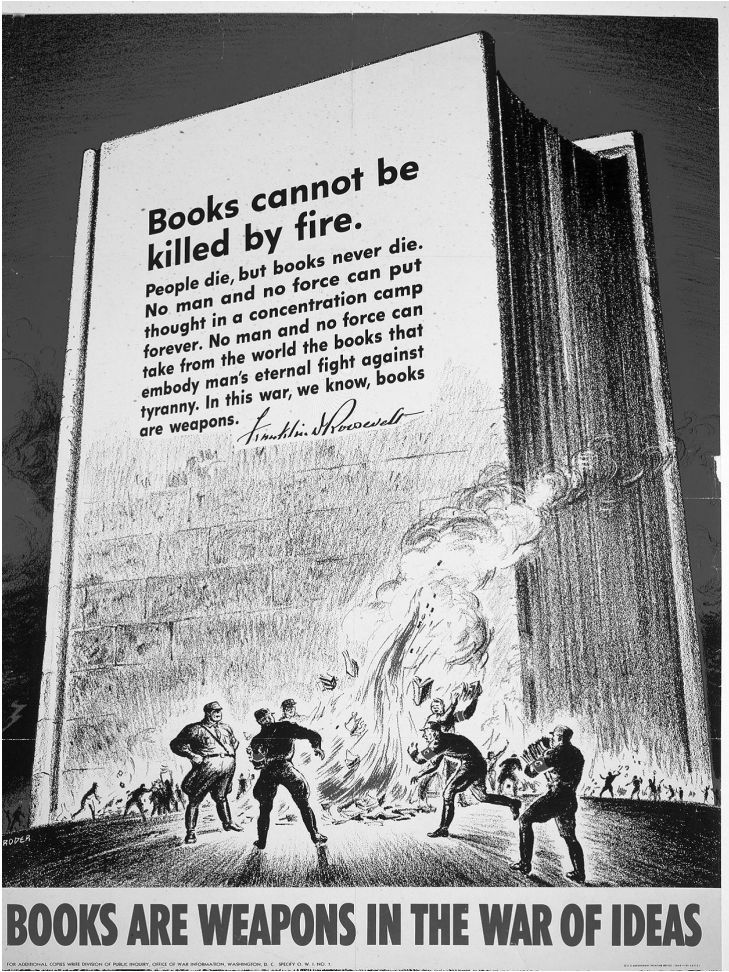
Discussion Three : WHY BAN THE GIVER?

The Giver has the distinction of being on a number of adults’ lists of books that they would like to see banned from school reading lists and public libraries.

“When Lois Lowry began writing children’s books more than 20 years ago, it never occurred to her that someone might try to ban them. Since then, eight of her books have been challenged in schools and public libraries across the country. One, THE GIVER, ranked No. 11 on the American Library Association’s most frequently challenged books of the 1990s.” - Thurston Hatcher, CNN.com Writer

“Banning books” (trying to keep them from being read or distributed) is not a new concept; in fact some of the most famous books in history were originally met with laws designed to keep them from being published. But what would some people find objectionable in The Giver?

- Imagine you’re having a conversation with an adult who has read The Giver and doesn’t think that students should be reading it. Come up with three arguments in favor of having the book available for students your age to read.
- Now turn it around and ask yourself - are there books, or films, or tv shows do you think shouldn’t be read or seen? Is it possible for a work of fiction to have negative consequences for individuals or a whole society? (Please note, there is no “right” or “wrong” answer to this question - it’s up to you how you feel.)
- Do some research into historical and fictional instances of banning books. What types of cultures and governments have tried to keep people from reading certain types of work, and why did they object?



Discussion Four : THE ART OF ADAPTATION

Every time a playwright or film writer adapts a book or story, they have to choose what elements of the original book to keep, what to change, and what to leave out.

Sometimes these decisions are very practical - a novel that includes 40 major characters might be workable on film, but not necessarily in a theatre, where you would run out of room backstage. And sometimes a novel includes so much interior thought from the major characters that it doesn’t lend itself to very physical expectations of a play audience.



Think about The Giver and list the elements of the original book that you think would be the most important to keep if you were writing your own adaptation for the stage. Then list what you think could be left out. Then list changes you could make to any of the characters, the setting of the story, or the ideas of the story that would make it particularly interesting to you if you were to produce your own version of the book.

THINGS FROM THE BOOK I WOULD KEEP

THINGS IN THE BOOK THAT ARE NOT THAT IMPORTANT

CHANGES YOU WOULD MAKE TO THE CHARACTERS, SETTING, ETC

After you see the play version, think about what changes the playwright made from the book. Can you list at least three things that were different on stage than they are in the book?

A Note from the Director of THE GIVER

This production of The Giver highlights the importance of why we need to have a whole rainbow of emotions and encourages the expression of our wants and needs. Just like the book, this show follows the journey of this discovery through the eyes of Jonas, a young person who is struggling with wanting to learn more.

We start with Jonas's visually dull world - one that everyone in the community has accepted in order to feel safe. This approach to life makes the world grey. Jonas is trying to his best to fit in with his family and friends, but feels something is missing. Just like the world around him. As Jonas learns from the Giver that memories give color to the world and feelings show wisdom, the stage becomes as beautiful, strange and alive as the memories and feelings themselves. The reader/viewer is learning along with Jonas as he is imparted wisdom from the Giver - not all of it is pretty and nice, black or white, but it grows as the our understanding does as well.

And one of the takeaways we're hoping for is a realization on the part of the audience that they need to be open to asking and thinking about the awkward questions, not shying away from them - just as the characters on stage do with each other.

Sameness comes from the willingness to give up choice. Sameness comes from the idea that you don't learn from the past, your own or the people around you. Choice is important because we can learn from the "wrong" choice, but also we can choose the people we want to become. The show should encourage everyone watching that you do need contrasts in your feelings and choices so you can learn how to navigate the colorful world around us. handle feelings that we don't think of as good so we can truly appreciate the world of people around us and all that comes with that.

- Nora Lise Ulrey - Director

