

Kat-and-Mouse Game: "The Hunger Games: Catching Fire"

Written by Mike Schulz

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THE HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE

My unfamiliarity with its source material was, I'm convinced, a large part of why I enjoyed last year's *The Hunger Games* movie so much. To be sure, I dug the film itself, with its exciting and moving survival-of-the-fittest encounters, and its fierce Jennifer Lawrence performance, and its bevy of grandly *outré* supporting figures (and, in the Capitol sequences, beyond-*outré* production design). But not having read any of the three books in Suzanne Collins' seminal young-adult adventure series, what I was most taken with was the surprise of the experience.

Hunger Games

newbies such as myself were allowed to take in Collins' richly imagined dystopian saga with gradual understanding and horror, much the way (I'm presuming) the books' readers did, and while we had every reason to expect Lawrence's teen warrior Katniss Everdeen to survive, the storyline was just spiky and unpredictable enough to make us wonder how, exactly, she ever would.

For my money, the series' second cinematic installment, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, doesn't inspire anywhere near that level of "What's gonna happen next?" engagement. It's a solid, mostly enjoyable follow-up and – with Francis Lawrence taking over the directorial reins from Gary Ross – sometimes even better than that; Jennifer Lawrence's already-excellent performance has significantly deepened, as have those of several of her co-stars, and the visual effects this time around have notably improved. And sure, as the second segment in a trilogy –

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one that will, as is the norm these days, be stretched into four movies – there was bound to be a certain amount of disappointment built into the tale.

(Mild spoiler: As the connective tissue between the original film and the forthcoming

Mockingjay

movies,

Catching Fire

isn't really designed as a stand-alone entertainment, and its finale is really just a teaser for a finale yet to come.) But as someone unschooled in Collins' literary works, I still left this sequel thinking: Is that

it

? We're goosed with a potentially fascinating and scary narrative in which Katniss, Josh Hutcherson's teammate Peeta, and 22 other survivors of previous challenges-to-the-death are forced into combat, and they (and we) are merely plunked into another jungle setting, with oddly similar threats, nearly identical to that of the first

Hunger Games

?



There's more to *Catching Fire* than that, of course – primarily the planned revenge of President Snow (the marvelously icy Donald Sutherland), who, aided by inscrutable gamesman Plutarch Heavensbee (Philip Seymour Hoffman), hopes that Katniss' televised demise will end the growing threat of nationwide insurrection. Yet beat for beat, and despite it being less overtly sentimental than Ross' film, this new outing felt like such a carbon copy of its forebear that I found myself slowly but unmistakably losing interest in the proceedings. Another grim prelude in the slums of Panem's District 12, with actor Liam Hemsworth – as Katniss' sidelined beau Gale – again suggesting that brother Chris "Thor" Hemsworth got all the charisma genes in the family. Another prepping-for-the-games tour, with returning players Woody Harrelson, Lenny Kravitz, Stanley Tucci, and the wondrous Elizabeth Banks collectively cornering the market in eccentricity. (Happily, Banks' Effie Trinket gets to be eccentrically

human

in this one.) Another series of training sequences. Another chastely romantic rendezvous between Katniss and Peeta, the latter of whom (as is telegraphed in Hutcherson's uncharacteristically listless portrayal) is given even less to do in this installment. And another slow rise from the subterranean depths as Katniss enters her

Most Dangerous Game

-esque

surroundings, snags a bow and arrows, joins up with some allies, and enters a tree- and vine-infested habitat that, luckily for her, looks and – despite the intense heat – feels an awful lot like the woods back home.

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Question: If President Snow really wanted to keep Katniss off-balance in the game, wouldn't he have insisted on an environment that this natural hunter might've felt less comfortable in? (In the original *Hunger Games*, we were told that the competitions' artificial locales were altered annually: deserts one year, tundras the next, et cetera.) Another question: Wouldn't a change of scenery have been more fun for *all of us*? Despite, however, diverting-enough attacks by poisonous fog and crazed baboons and, creepiest of all, birds whose chirping sounds just like the tortured shrieks of the contestants' loved ones,

Catching Fire

's setting, and the means by which the game reaches its conclusion, feel too much like business as usual. And despite the promising introduction of fellow challengers played by Jena Malone, Sam Claflin (quite good as Finnick), Jeffrey Wright, Lynn Cohen, and the beloved weirdo supreme Amanda Plummer, we're even deprived of almost all chances to watch the games' participants battle one another. (Each of the aforementioned new arrivals winds up a friend to Katniss and Peeta, and as

Pulp Fiction

fans will attest, giving Jennifer Lawrence an adversary with fanged teeth is way less interesting than the possibilities inherent in letting her square off against Amanda Plummer.) Even at almost two and a half hours, this

Hunger Games

blockbuster is never boring, and there are certainly enough compelling actors and situations to keep me psyched for part three. I just wish I didn't leave this professionally rendered, narratively ho-hum

Hunger Games

endeavor thinking the

Catching

in its title wasn't accidentally replaced by

Lacking

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