How does the film of The Hunger Games stand up against Suzanne Collins' novel?

The Hunger Games set a new box office record in its opening weekend. But how does it stand up against Suzanne Collins' novel? BfK film reviewer Laura Fraine reports.

When your job is to compare a film with the book from which it is adapted, you tend to overcome certain expectations before you enter the cinema. There are only so many times you can say that a film rarely lives up to a great book (although often mediocre books make pretty good pictures). Even with this caveat in mind, The Hunger Games makes disappointing viewing. This was a novel I had devoured over the previous three evenings, staying up late just to read one more chapter. A book that is both original and compulsive. The film, which is co-written by Collins, is not in the same league.

The Hunger Games is the story of Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence), a feisty 16-year-old growing up in a near-future dystopia. Panem, once known as North America, is now under control of a totalitarian state following a civil war some years previous. Each district of the state has its own role to play and Katniss lives in District 12, the impoverished coal mining region where just surviving is a daily challenge. This tough start in life stands our heroine in good stead when she is entered into the Hunger Games, an annual televised fight-to-the-death organised by the Capitol to keep the districts in line. Two children, aged 12 to 18, are chosen from each district to enter the Hunger Games, which end when only one of these children is left alive. The premise is sickening, and yet the whole country watches, unable to turn away.

While aimed at the Twilight generation, The Hunger Games has more in common with films in the ?extreme reality? genre, such as Battle Royale and The Running Man. We all understand that, as Katniss says, ?If no-one watches, then they don?t have a game?, but we all watch anyway, urging the heroine to fight for survival, even if the fight is against other innocents. We know it is repellent for this to make compulsive viewing ? and yet it does, and we look on. The point is that we are complicit. In fact, I am clearly immoral enough to have felt the film lacked graphic violence. For morality is at the core of this story; particularly in the book, the reader is made to feel responsible for their own voyeurism.

One thing Hollywood so often fails to offer, which is usually where books come into their own, is the ability to see shades of grey. The lack of first-person narrative in the film means that the layers that run through Katniss? story are diminished. In the novel, she is an unreliable narrator. In order to succeed in the games, she is advised to create a romantic interest story with her fellow District 12 contestant, Peeta (Josh Hutcherson). She tells us she has no genuine interest in him except in relation to their survival. It is up to us whether we believe her, but it is clear from the ending of the book that this is not a foregone conclusion.

This change in narrative perspective also means we miss out on huge swathes of back story, which explain why Katniss?s childhood makes her so independent and so angry; why she finds it difficult to trust. The girl in the novel is complicated - more aggressive, more interesting and more likeable ? and, yes, of course she?s not quite so attractive.
The novel also goes much further in explaining why the games take place while the film cuts out important material which roots the story in a realistic, if nightmarish future. To be fair, this is because the film is busy creating a television set-up which is bright and dazzling, a highly stylised world which archly mocks our obsession with reality documentaries. Woody Harrelson excels as the alcoholic mentor who knows the game yet bucks the system that forces him to play it. Donald Sutherland is just the right blend of smooth and sinister as President Snow, while Stanley Tucci as Caesar Flickerman and Elizabeth Banks as Effie Trinket are horribly fun.

This might be the film’s strongest part, but the glitzy satire, which both mocks and utilises surface appeal, is not enough to sustain the picture. The parts of the story the film doesn’t show might be less fitting with the thriller format, but the ability to combine satisfying depth with page-turning action is what makes Suzanne Collins’ novel such a hit. For the price of a cinema ticket you can probably pick up the whole Hunger Games trilogy. In this instance, that would be my wholehearted recommendation.

The Hunger Games trilogy box set (978 1 4071 3029 3) is published by Scholastic at £23.97.

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