

Keep this behind your HANDOUTS/NOTES tab!

-Fully annotate the article= all steps! Pay specific attention to making connections between your summer reading, *A Sound of Thunder*, and this article: how do they all connect?

-Be prepared to debate the following (use evidence from the article to support your reasoning):

1. Is Rebecca Solnit a reliable author?
2. Is America a dystopian society?

American Dystopia More Reality than Fiction 1, 2017

Rebecca Solnit May

When I was growing up, I ate books for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and since I was constantly running out of reading material, I read everyone else's -- which for a girl with older brothers meant science fiction. The books were supposed to be about the future, but they always turned out to be very much about this very moment.

Some of them -- Robert Heinlein's "Stranger in a Strange Land" -- were comically of their time: that novel's vision of the good life seemed to owe an awful lot to the Playboy Mansion in its prime, only with telepathy and being nice added in. Frank Herbert's "Dune" had similarly sixties social mores, but its vision of an intergalactic world of disciplined desert *jihadis* and a great game for the substance that made all long-distance transit possible is even more relevant now. Think: drug cartels meet the oil industry in the deep desert.

We now live in a world that is wilder than a lot of science fiction from my youth. My phone is 58 times faster than IBM's fastest mainframe computer in 1964 (calculates my older brother Steve) and more powerful than the computers on the Apollo spaceship we landed on the moon in 1969 (adds my nephew Jason). Though we never got the promised jetpacks and the Martians were a bust, we do live in a time when genetic engineers use jellyfish genes to make mammals glow in the dark and nerds in southern Nevada kill people in Pakistan and Afghanistan with unmanned drones. Anyone who time-traveled from the sixties would be astonished by our age, for its wonders and its horrors and its profound social changes. But science fiction is about the present more than the future, and we do have a new science fiction trilogy that's perfect for this very moment.

Sacrificing the Young in the Arenas of Capital

"The Hunger Games", Suzanne Collins's bestselling young-adult novel and top-grossing blockbuster movie, is all about this very moment in so many ways. For those of you hiding out deep in the woods, it's set in a dystopian future North America, a continent divided into downtrodden, fearful districts ruled by a decadent, luxurious oligarchy in the Capitol. Supposedly to punish the districts for an uprising 74 years ago, but really to provide Roman-style blood and circuses to intimidate and distract, the Capitol requires each district to provide two adolescent Tributes, drawn by lottery each year, to compete in the gladiatorial Hunger Games broadcast across the nation.

That these 24 youths battle each other to the death with one lone victor allowed to survive makes it like -- and yet not exactly like -- high school, that concentration camp

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for angst and competition into which we force our young. After all, even such real-life situations can be fatal: [witness](#) the gay Iowa teen who took his life only a few weeks ago after being outed and taunted by his peers, not to speak of the epidemic of other suicides by queer teens that Dan Savage's "[It Gets Better](#)" website, film, and books aspire to reduce.

But really, in this moment, the cruelty of teens to teens is far from the most atrocious thing in the land. "The Hunger Games" reminds us of that. Its Capitol is, of course, the land of the 1 percent, a sort of amalgamation of Fashion Week, Versailles, and the KGB/CIA. Collins's timely trilogy makes it clear that the 1 percent, having created a system of deeply embedded cruelty, should go, something highlighted by the surly defiance of heroine Katniss Everdeen -- Annie Oakley, Tank Girl, and Robin Hood all rolled into one -- who refuses to be disposed of.

Now, in our world, gladiatorial entertainment and the disposability of the young are mostly separate things (except in football, boxing, hockey, and other contact sports that regularly result in brain damage, and sometimes even in death). But while the Capitol is portrayed as brutal for annually sacrificing 23 teenagers from the Districts, what about our own Capitol in the District of Columbia? It has a war or two on, if you hadn't noticed.

In Iraq, 4,486 mostly young Americans died. If you want to count Iraqis (which you should indeed want to do), the deaths of babies, children, grandmothers, young men, and others total more than [106,000](#) by the most conservative count, hundreds of thousands by others. Even the lowest numbers represent enough kill to fill nearly 5,000 years of Hunger Games.

Then, of course, there are thousands more Americans who were so grievously wounded they might have died in previous conflicts, but are now surviving with severe brain damage, multiple missing limbs, or other profound mutilations. And don't forget the trauma and mental illness that mostly goes unacknowledged and untreated or the far more devastating [Iraqi version](#) of the same. And never mind Afghanistan, with its own grim numbers and horrific consequences.

Our wartime carnage has been on a grand scale, but it hasn't been on television in any meaningful way; it's generally been semi-hidden by most of the American media and the government, which [censored](#) images of returning coffins, corpses, civilian casualties, and anything else uncomfortable (though in our science-fiction era when every phone is potentially a video camera, the [leakage](#) has still been colossal). Most of us did a good job of being distracted by other things -- including reality TV, of course. The US Ambassador and military commander in Afghanistan were furious not that our soldiers [struck jokey poses](#) with severed limbs, but that the Los Angeles Times dared to publish them last month. And those whistleblowers who [took the effort](#) to reveal the little men behind the throne are facing severe punishment. Witness one Hunger-Games-style [hero](#), Bradley Manning, the slight young soldier turned alleged leaker, long held in inhumane conditions and now facing a potential life sentence.