

Do Students Make the Connection?

Many teachers assign *The Giver* to students who are too young to appreciate its message

Students today love to read books and watch their movie adaptations about dystopian societies – where oppressive, dehumanizing governments create the opposite of utopia in a misguided attempt to eradicate war, misery, conflict, and pain. While books like *The Giver*, *Divergent*, and *The Hunger Games* are all the rage with teens these days, I wonder if they realize the similarities between the fiction they read and some disturbing aspects of American society today.

Many elementary and junior high teachers assign *The Giver* for their students to read. Over the years, I've received calls and emails from parents concerned about this reading assignment because of its descriptions of euthanasia and sexual awakening in the main character. The book made the American Library Association's list of most challenged or banned books between 2000 and 2009.

I like the book's conservative message against the dehumanizing dangers of government. But I think the book is not well served by having students read it when they are not emotionally or intellectually ready to appreciate the theological, moral, and social issues it raises.

The Story

The Giver recently hit movie theaters (starring Jeff Bridges and Meryl Streep). Written in 1993 by Lois Lowry, the story is set in a society in which pain and suffering have been eliminated, but at the cost of eliminating choices and strong emotions. "Sameness" is a social virtue. Jonas, the main character, is a 12-year-old boy chosen to become the Receiver of Memory. This person keeps all the memories before there was Sameness. The Receiver of Memory can help the society's leaders – the Elders – if they need to access his memories of struggle and pain. But, in the process of receiving memories from the Giver of Memories, Jonas begins to realize a darker side to the "perfect society." He sees that suffering is eliminated by euthanizing "unfit" infants and senior citizens (euphemistically referred to as sending them to "Elsewhere"). The plot revolves around a horrified Jonas setting out to make things right.

The Abortion Parallel

When teachers use *The Giver* with students who are too young, they do a disservice to the book's powerful examination of moral issues. For example, they read about a gruesome scene of a baby being euthanized by the state. Are teachers willing to help their students make the connection that they are actually living in a society that values the killing of innocent children because it supposedly serves the greater good of personal au-

tonomy and alleviating potential social burdens?

Group Think

Through dystopian stories like *The Giver* young people also read and watch how freedom of conscience is subordinated to group-think. But, do they realize that they are witnessing this very thing happening in America today when it comes to the suppression of religious freedom in the name of group-think about same sex marriage? For example, wedding photographer Elaine Huguenin declined the job of

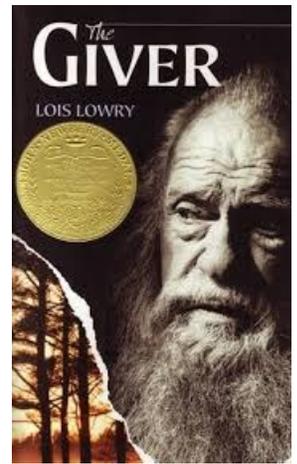
photographing a same-sex wedding because she believed that using her creative talents to memorialize the ceremony would be an act of endorsement and would, therefore, violate her religious conscience.

In the dystopian world advanced by the New Mexico Supreme Court, Justice Richard Bosson declared that religious people should be "compelled by law to compromise the very religious beliefs that inspire their lives." He went on to write that being forced to aid a ceremony that Elaine's religion says is against God's moral law "is the price of citizenship." The Elders in *The Giver* would wholeheartedly agree.

Ending the Imagined Pain of Discrimination

In another example of dystopia today, the California State University system Chancellor, Charles Reed, recently declared that the 23 universities in the Cal State system will no longer recognize student religious clubs if they require their *leaders* to adhere to the club's religion. In the twisted logic of the Chancellor, discrimination against religious students is necessary in order to prevent religious students from discriminating against others even if it means religious clubs will be led by people who don't believe in that religion! So, in the dystopian world of California universities, atheists can now lead Christian clubs and Muslims can lead Jewish clubs. Apparently, the potential pain of discrimination is just too great and must be prevented by Mr. Reed. Again, the Elders in *The Giver* would wholeheartedly agree.

If teachers are not willing to draw parallels between the society described in *The Giver* and disturbing trends in American society today, then the book is reduced from being thought-provoking education to being merely titillating entertainment. ■



The Giver (Jeff Bridges) explains memories to The Receiver (Brenton Thwaites) in the movie adaptation.



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