

The Giver – Lois Lowry

Overview

The Giver is a 1993 American young adult dystopian novel by Lois Lowry. It is set in a society which at first appears to be utopian but is revealed to be dystopian as the story progresses.

Utopian: aiming for a state where everything is perfect.

Dystopian: an antonym (opposite) of utopia. A society or place that is undesirable or frightening.

It is written from the point of view of Jonas, an eleven-year-old boy, living in a futuristic society that has eliminated all pain, fear, war, and hatred. There is no prejudice, since everyone looks and acts basically the same, and there is very little competition. Everyone is unfailingly polite. The society has also eliminated choice: at age twelve every member of the community is assigned a job based on his or her abilities and interests. Citizens can apply for and be assigned compatible spouses, and each couple is assigned exactly two children each. The children are born to Birthmothers, who never see them, and spend their first year in a 'Nurturing Centre' with other babies, or 'newchildren' born that year. When their children are grown, family units dissolve and adults live together with Childless Adults until they are too old to function in the society. Then they spend their last years being cared for in the House of the Old until they are finally 'released' from the society. In the community, release is death, but it is never described that way; most people think that after release, flawed newchildren and joyful elderly people are welcomed into the vast expanse of Elsewhere that surrounds the communities. Citizens who break rules or fail to adapt properly to the society's codes of behaviour are also released, though in their cases it is an occasion of great shame. Everything is planned and organised so that life is as convenient and pleasant as possible.

The main character, Jonas (aged 12) lives with his father, a Nurturer of new children, his mother, who works at the Department of Justice, and his seven-year-old sister Lily. At the beginning of the novel, he is apprehensive about the upcoming Ceremony of Twelve, when he will be given his official Assignment as a new adult member of the community. He does not have a distinct career preference, although he enjoys volunteering at a variety of different jobs. Though he is a well-behaved citizen and a good student, Jonas is different: he has pale eyes, while most people in his community have dark eyes, and he has unusual powers of perception. Sometimes objects 'change' when he looks at them. He does not know it yet, but he alone in his community can perceive flashes of colour; for everyone else, the world is as devoid of colour as it is of pain, hunger, and inconvenience.

At the Ceremony of Twelve, Jonas is given the highly honoured Assignment of Receiver of Memory. The Receiver is the sole keeper of the community's collective memory. When the community went over to Sameness—its painless, warless, and mostly emotionless state of tranquility and harmony—it abandoned all memories of pain, war, and emotion, but the memories cannot disappear totally. Someone must keep them so that the community can avoid making the mistakes of the past, even though no one but the Receiver can bear the pain. Jonas receives the memories of the past, good and bad, from the current Receiver, a wise old man who tells Jonas to call him the Giver. The Giver transmits memories by placing his hands on Jonas' bare back. The first memory he receives is of an exhilarating sled ride. As Jonas receives memories from the Giver—memories of pleasure and pain, of bright colours and extreme cold and warm sun, of excitement and terror and hunger and love—he realises how bland and empty life in his community really is. The memories make Jonas' life richer and more meaningful, and he wishes that he could give that richness and meaning to the people he loves. But in exchange for their peaceful existence, the people of Jonas' community have lost the capacity to love him back or to feel deep passion about anything. Since they have never experienced real suffering, they also cannot appreciate the real joy of life, and the life of individual people seems less precious to them. In addition, no one in Jonas' community has ever made a choice of his or her

own. Jonas grows more and more frustrated with the members of his community, and the Giver, who has felt the same way for many years, encourages him. The two grow very close, like a grandfather and a grandchild might have in the days before Sameness, when family members stayed in contact long after their children were grown. Meanwhile, Jonas is helping his family take care of a problem, newchild, Gabriel, who has trouble sleeping through the night at the Nurturing Centre. Jonas helps the child to sleep by transmitting soothing memories to him every night, and he begins to develop a relationship with Gabriel that mirrors the family relationships he has experienced through the memories. When Gabriel is in danger of being released, the Giver reveals to Jonas that release is the same as death. Jonas' rage and horror at this revelation inspire the Giver to help Jonas devise a plan to change things in the community forever. The Giver tells Jonas about the girl who had been designated the new Receiver ten years before. She had been the Giver's own daughter, but the sadness of some of the memories had been too much for her and she had asked to be released. When she died, all of the memories she had accumulated were released into the community, and the community members could not handle the sudden influx of emotion and sensation.

The Giver and Jonas plan for Jonas to escape the community and to actually enter Elsewhere. Once he has done that, his larger supply of memories will disperse, and the Giver will help the community to come to terms with the new feelings and thoughts, changing the society forever. However, Jonas is forced to leave earlier than planned when his father tells him that Gabriel will be released the next day. Desperate to save Gabriel, Jonas steals his father's bicycle and a supply of food and sets off for Elsewhere. Gradually, he enters a landscape full of colour, animals, and changing weather, but also hunger, danger, and exhaustion. Avoiding search planes, Jonas and Gabriel travel for a long time until heavy snow makes bike travel impossible. Half-frozen, but comforting Gabriel with memories of sunshine and friendship, Jonas mounts a high hill. There he finds a sled—the sled from his first transmitted memory—waiting for him at the top. Jonas and Gabriel experience a glorious downhill ride on the sled. Ahead of them, they see—or think they see—the twinkling lights of a friendly village at Christmas, and they hear music. Jonas is sure that someone is waiting for them there.

Chapter 1

Jonas is trying hard to decide which word best describes the way he is feeling about the upcoming December ceremony where he will be told what job he will have for the rest of his life. He recalls when a pilot inadvertently flew over the community and was 'released' as a result. At dinner that evening, Jonas and his family are engaged in a conversation called 'The telling of feelings'.

Vocabulary to pre-teach

Intrigued – very interested or curious

Citizen – A legally recognised person or individual of a country

Hatchery – a place where eggs are hatched – typically those of chicken or fish

Distraught – very upset

Apprehensive – anxious, concerned or fearful that something bad might happen

Ritual – a religious-like or serious ceremony or tradition that happens at a certain time or in a certain order

Disposition – a person's unique qualities or character

Awed – amazed in a respectful way about how good something is

Nurturer - carer

Questions

P1 Why is Jonas so careful about what word to use? = the emphasis on precise language suggests that the community is quite formal and rational.

P1 That Jonas had only been frightened once before tells us what? = it implies that the community is very safe.

P3 What might being 'released' mean? = you are sent to another place is what people think, but in reality (although we don't know it at this point in the book, it means death by lethal injection and their bodies are thrown away.) DON'T TELL PUPILS THIS YET BUT PERHAPS ASK FOR THEIR THOUGHTS. (THE AUTHOR IS DELIBERATELY BUILDING TENSION.)

P6 The evening telling of feelings is a ritual that happens every day. What does this suggest about the community? = there is a strong emphasis on rules, which is rather unsettling.

P10 There are strict limits on what children families can have. This suggests what about their values? = society rules are more important than personal choice or emotion.

Chapter 2

The family are discussing the different ceremonies that happen at different ages. We learn more about the precision and formality of the way that the society is structured and governed. The main ceremony (and the one that Jonas is preoccupied with is when children, at age 12, receive their Assignments (jobs for life).

Vocabulary to pre-teach

Adherence – sticking or committing to something

Element of suspense – a certain amount of excitement or anxiety about what might happen

Assignment – job or task

Aptitude – skill or talent

Labourer – worker

Questions

P15 The father whispers the baby's name in secret. What does that tell us? = he is a nice, caring man.

P19 Why were the 'Committee Elders' watching him and taking notes? = to match him to the job most ideal for his aptitudes. That they take into account personal interests suggests that they know what's best for the citizens better than the citizens themselves. That among all his friends, Jonas is yet to settle on one interest is the first indication that Jonas is different.

P22 How important is friendship? = it's not. This society does not value the bonds of friendship.

P23 What happens at age 8 and what does that tell us? = teddies are taken away, forcing everyone to mature at exactly the same age. The formal use of 'comfort objects' in a completely safe society implies fear is an innate human emotion.