



The Giver

by Lois Lowry

In a Nutshell

[Lois Lowry](#) published *The Giver* in 1993. At the time, she had already won a [Newbery Medal](#) for her earlier novel, [Number the Stars](#), in 1990. But, because two is always better than one, she won a second Newbery for *The Giver*. And, because anything intended for young adults that mentions sex or government is often labeled "controversial," it was banned. A lot.

The Giver tells the story of a young boy named Jonas living in a highly controlled community some time in the future. The novel fits into a larger genre of cautionary tales called "dystopian literature." A utopia is a society in which everything is perfect, so a dystopia is the opposite: everything has gone wrong. The novel explores Jonas's encounter with memories of "the past," a time much like ours, in which people still had the freedom of choice.

In a way, *The Giver* being banned actually helps it make its point. If you were around in the early nineties, think back to the insane obsession with political correctness. (And if you weren't around, just take our word for it.) All of a sudden, firemen were fire *fighters*. People stopped using the word "cripple" to describe those who are physically handicapped. "Merry Christmas" signs weren't put up in schools. [Star Trek: The Next Generation](#) even changed its famous introduction to say "To boldly go where no *one* has gone before" (it used to be "no man"). *The Giver* can be seen as a reaction to these changes. It might suggest that, actually, we're taking things a *wee bit* too far. (When you read the novel, look out for the "precision of language" piece.)

Despite the initial controversy, *The Giver* is one of the most popular books for young adults today. Also, it seems to come up even in college-level Philosophy and Political Science classes, and you don't want to be caught out of the loop. So read it.

Why Should I Care?

The Giver explores an age old debate: Freedom, or safety? Individuality, or the greater good? Emotional highs and lows, or the steady middle ground? And the novel gives a pretty clear answer, too: freedom, individuality, highs and lows.

But the question isn't really this easy or this simple. (Nothing ever is...) We find that the choice isn't a clear A-or-B decision. There are thousands of shades of grey in between, so the difficulty comes in choosing a stance and sticking to it.

The classic example is the good old "Should a person be allowed to yell 'fire' in a crowded theater?" question.

If you say yes, you're risking lives.

If you say no, you're compromising the freedom of speech.

You probably had a realization along these lines sometime around, oh, second grade, when that twerp who stood behind you in line used to taunt you with "It's a free country!" every time he tied your shoelaces together or put glue inside your Oreos.

And you always wanted to say something nasty back to him, but you didn't want to sound un-patriotic.

Well, whoopee-cushion victim, your day has come.

What does "freedom" mean, anyway? How far do you want to push this idea? How many risks do you want to take? You might rebel against the idea of having to wear a uniform to school - but does that mean everyone should be allowed to come to class naked? You wish you could pick your own classes in middle school, but does that mean you should be allowed to study [Monopoly](#)-ology for three years? (Before you answer, just ask yourself if this is an employable skill.) You'd like to think you have the freedom to voice your opinion, but does that mean you can curse bloody murder at your teacher every afternoon until you get your way?

So the next time you find yourself in a position reminiscent of being eight-years-old and standing in front of a twerp who whines about freedom, you'll have something to say.

Or, you know, just hit him on the forehead with your copy of *The Giver*.