The Giver:
By Lois Lowry

An Introduction to the Novel
Background Information

History of the Author and Novel
Lois Lowry was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1937. Her father was a dentist in the United States Army, and the family traveled all over the world.

Lowry is the author of over twenty books and has received two Newbery medals, including one for *The Giver* in 1993.

Lois Lowry told Contemporary Authors that she measures her success as an author by her ability to “help adolescents answer their own questions about life, identity, and human relationships.”

She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her dog, Bandit.
**The Giver** was inspired in part by Lowry’s relationship with her father who was, at that time, in a nursing home having lost most of his long-term memory.

She realized one day while visiting her father that, without memory, there is no pain, and began to imagine a society in which the past was deliberately forgotten.

The flaws in that supposedly ideal society show the need for personal and societal memory and for making connections with the past and with each other.
Like its predecessors *Brave New World* and *1984*, *The Giver* is Lowry’s attempt to criticize reality by creating a utopian society.

As we read, we discover that the act of controlling a society is often worse than the disappointments it is meant to eliminate.

We quickly realize that this utopian society is really dystopian. However, Lowry’s society, unlike the others, offers some hope in the end.
**The Giver** ranks #11 out of 100 on the ALA’s list of most challenged titles from 1990-1999.

Published in 1993, *The Giver* reflects some of the social criticism of the times. Abortion, family ethics, euthanasia, and assisted suicide are all issues that were hotly debated in the 1990s.

Lowry deals with these issues by creating a seemingly perfect society that never experiences any of the unpleasant realities of life.
As a genre, Science Fiction deals with imaginary worlds, people, and technology.

Sometimes, technology or the society are not fully explained because the author wants the reader to use their imagination OR the technology does not yet exist and cannot be fully explained.

Therefore you have to “let go” of your need for it to make perfect sense and instead, think about why the author would include certain technology instead of how the technology works.
Even though the societies and settings in science fiction seem to be totally different from ours, the author wants us to compare our society to theirs and look for similarities.

Often, the idea is for us to imagine what would happen if our society was like the society in the novel and how that would make us feel.

The author also wants to be able to discuss touchy or heavily debated topics without directly relating it to our society so people are more open to thinking about it.
Suspension of Disbelief:

- It refers to the willingness of a person to accept as true the premises of a work of fiction, even if they are fantastic or impossible.

- In *The Giver*, like many works of science fiction, the reader is asked to accept the world of the novel as realistic in order to gain an understanding of the issues and ideas the author is trying to express.
Into the Novel:
A Helpful Preview of Ideas and Concepts
Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* is set in an imaginary world during an unspecified time.

The community in the novel is isolated and seemingly utopian in nature, with no pain, illness, or color.

Each individual has a designated place in society.

Many of the unique traits and rituals that set people apart in other societies have been eliminated.

The author is deliberately vague in further defining the setting, for to narrow it down any more specifically would detract from the ominous atmosphere of this society of “Sameness.”
A utopia is supposed to be a place of ideal perfection, especially in laws, government, and social conditions. This is usually an imaginary place in literature. A common theme in Utopian Literature is to “uncover” the society for what it really is: a place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives.
The Rules in Jonas’ Society

- Jonas’ community is forced to live by strict rules in order for their society to avoid negative emotions like fear, anger, hurt, jealousy and maintain the “utopia.”

- However, there are so many rules that the citizen’s are not free to make their own decisions or have free choice.

- The novel does not explain where the rules come from. We can assume the founders of the community invented them to create what they considered to be a utopia.

- Is it worth sacrificing choice and individuality it to never feel “bad” emotions?
Early in the novel, we learn that the citizens of Jonas’ world are taught to use precise language. They believe that by being accurate, they will avoid any misconceptions that can cause pain or hurt feelings. Not only are rules and apologies recited in unison at school, but students carefully choose the right adjectives to describe certain situations or what they are thinking or feeling. This makes the use of euphemism an important tool in Jonas’ world.
An **euphemism** is a word or term that has mild or vague connotations and that serves to mask the offensiveness or harshness of the actual word or term.

- Example: A used car being called “certified pre-owned”

- What euphemisms are used in our society?

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*Counselor! Kindly refer to it as “murder,” not “thinning out the herd.”*
Part of Lowry’s exploration of what it would be like to live without feelings involves her use of color in the novel.

We’ll see how she explores color as we read the novel.

Colors are associated with emotions and symbolize feelings.

Without them it may be more difficult to have full experiences or express ourselves.
The idea that the human race can be improved by controlling who can reproduce.

During the Holocaust, Hitler wanted Nazi scientists to explore this idea so he could create a “perfect” society.

People with “favorable” traits are allowed and encouraged to reproduce.

People with “unfavorable” traits are discouraged or even prohibited from reproducing.

Who gets to decide?
The Characters

- **Jonas:** He is the main character. Thoughtful and kind.

- **Lily:** She is Jonas’ sister. She’s a talkative and simple child.

- **Jonas’ mother:** She works at the Department of Justice. Her job involves handing out punishment to community members who break one of the many rules.

- **Jonas’ father:** Because of his nurturing qualities, he is chosen to work as a Nurturer.
The Character’s Continued

- **Asher:** He is Jonas’ best friend. He is easily distracted and likes to have fun.

- **Fiona:** Another of Jonas’ friends. She is gentle and caring with the Old.

- **Gabriel:** He is the “newchild” that Jonas’ father brings home to live with the family. He has light eyes like Jonas.

- **The Giver:** The Giver has pale eyes like Jonas. He is an old man who appears to be much older than his actual age. His job as Receiver of Memory, although a position of honor, has caused him to live with great pain and loneliness.
Memory: At some point in the past, the community in *The Giver* decided to eliminate all pain from their lives. To do so, they had to give up the memories of their society’s collective experiences. Not only did this allow them to forget all of the pain that had been suffered throughout human history, it also prevented members of the society from wanting to engage in activities and relationships that could result in conflict and suffering, and eliminated any nostalgia for the things the community gave up in order to live in total peace and harmony.

Sparknotes.com
Pain vs. Pleasure: Related to the theme of memory is the idea that there can be no pleasure without pain and no pain without pleasure. No matter how delightful an experience is, you cannot value the pleasure it gives you unless you have some memory of a time when you have suffered. The members of Jonas’s community cannot appreciate the joys in their lives because they have never felt pain: their lives are totally monotonous, devoid of emotional variation. Similarly, they do not feel pain or grief because they do not appreciate the true wonder of life: death is not tragic to them because life is not precious.
Themes: Think about It...

**Being an Individual:** The novel can even be seen as an allegory for the process of maturation: twelve-year-old Jonas rejects a society where everyone is the same to follow his own path. The novel encourages readers to celebrate differences instead of disparaging them or pretending they do not exist.
“We really have to protect people from wrong choices.”

-The Giver