



## The Giver

by Lois Lowry

**The Giver** is a dystopian novel, popular in BC schools, about a highly evolved society that has found ways to minimize or even eradicate pain from human lives through drugs and structure. But the cost to this pleasant, safe and orderly system, called “Sameness,” is emotional sterility.

In the story, older children are given daily doses of “medicine” to prevent “the stirrings” or deep emotions that develop naturally in adolescence. And all pain is avoided. Using painkillers is a normal part of daily life’s cuts and scrapes—why suffer?—and nobody ever experiences severe pain for long as injections are readily available to knock a person out in extreme circumstances such as a bad accident. Even the pain of death is avoided. People are “released” through lethal injection at a prescribed time and place, with much celebration around the expected event of leaving the community. The only exception is the person in society who is given the honour of serving as the Receiver of Memories, because it’s his or her job to remember, feel and carry all the pain—related to poverty, starvation, war and death—from the past so others in the community don’t have to. Part of the Receiver’s job is also to experience pleasure, love and every other positive human emotion. But such proves to be an unbearable burden for some young Receivers-in-training, including the story’s protagonist, 12-year-old Jonas. For how can a person embrace their society’s emotional sterility after having felt the joys of being truly alive, regardless of risks and consequences?

The concepts of safety and safe drug use are core themes in this popular story. But more than that the novel begs to be explored for its ideas around our choices to feel or suppress pain and joy, and the relationship between them. It also invites us to think about ways we can manage pain and joy for the benefit of both the individual and community.

### Instructional strategies

1. While drawing attention to passages from the book, facilitate engaged philosophical discussions on important topics such as:
  - a. Freedom and choice

In Chapter 13:

“Or what, if he went on, almost laughing at the absurdity, “they choose their own jobs?”

“Frightening, isn’t it?” The Giver said.

Jonas chuckled. “Very frightening. I can’t even imagine it. We really have to protect people from choices.”

“It’s safer.”

“Yes,” Jonas agreed. “Much safer.”

But when the conversation turned to other things, Jonas was left, still, with a feeling of frustration he didn’t understand.

In chapter 22:

Jonas remembered, suddenly and grimly, the time in his childhood when he had used a word. The word had been “starving.” You have never been starving, he had been told. You will never be starving.

“Is something wrong, Jonas?” his father asked at the evening meal. “You’re so quiet tonight. Are you feeling well? Would you like some medication?”

But Jonas remembered the rules. No medication for anything related to his training.

And no discussion of his training. At the time of freshings, he simply said that he felt tired, that his school lessons had been unusually demanding that day.

He went to his sleeping room early, and the door closed to him so he could hear his parents and sister laughing as they gave Gabriel his evening bath.

They have never known pain, he thought. The realization made him feel desperately lonely, and his throbbing leg. He eventually slept. Again and again he dreamed of the anguish and the isolation of the forsaken hill.

You might use question like:

- x In *The Giver* people are supplied with drugs to ensure they never have to live with pain. Would it be good to never know pain?
- x Do you think there might be anything good about experiencing pain? Can you imagine ever seeing pain as something precious? Have you ever chosen to accept pain when you could have avoided it? Explain.
- x Our society encourages people (through advertising and other ways) to escape from pain by taking different kinds of painkillers. Can we always protect ourselves from experiencing pain? Can our attempts to avoid pain ever lead to any problems? Explain.
- x One reason people use opioid drugs like heroin or fentanyl is to deal with physical or emotional pain. Is this a good idea? Why or why not?
- x In *The Giver* most people are protected from experiencing pain and painful memories, but these must be borne by the Receiver of Memory. If it were possible, would it be a good idea to concentrate all pain in one person or a small group of people? Do we in fact already concentrate pain in certain people or populations in our society? Explain.

2. Have students write a short story or poem on one of the topics below:

- x Living without choice – explore a life in which you never had to make a choice, and try to reflect both the benefits and costs to the individual or community
- x Dealing with “what if” – explore the issue of consequences in the life of an individual or community, reflecting on our tendency to think “what if I had chosen differently...?” and present a resolution to the tension
- x Choosing pain – explore the life of someone who chooses to endure pain (e.g., an athlete or someone who accepts pain in order to help someone else) and try to reflect the inner struggle they may experience as well as what they get from the pain
- x Seeking relief – explore the life of someone seeking relief from pain, the extent to which they will go, the mixed results they achieve and the lessons they learn

3. Have students write a journal entry in which they complete the following statements after reflecting on the themes of this lesson.
  - a. I would like to stop ...
  - b. I would like to start ...
  - c. I would like to continue ...

## Drug literacy

### Big ideas

- x Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- x As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- x We can learn how to control our drug use by reflecting on the different ways people have thought about drugs, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other



### Competencies

- x Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and societies
- x Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- x Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs

For a complete look at the drug literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: [www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-curriculum.pdf](http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-curriculum.pdf)

## Links to Curriculum

### First Peoples' principles of learning

- x Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- x Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions
- x Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities
- x Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story
- x Learning requires exploration of one's identity

## English Language Arts-8

### Big ideas

- x Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world
- x Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens

### Competencies

- x Apply appropriate strategies to comprehend written, oral, and visual texts, guide inquiry, and extend thinking
- x Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- x Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
- x Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways
- x Exchange ideas and viewpoints to build shared understanding and extend thinking
- x Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful literary and informational texts for a variety of purposes and audiences