



CURRENT CINEMA

THE HUNGER GAMES

THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS & SNAKES

MICHAEL ARNDT AND MICHAEL LESSLIE
EXECUTE A RETURN TO PANEM

BY DAVID SOMERSET



THE HUNGER GAMES MOVIE FRANCHISE had spawned four movies from novelist Suzanne Collins' work, kicking off with 2012's eponymous film, which introduced cinema audiences to the dystopian world of Panem. It depicts a nation where a brutal civil war has led to a future version of America separated into 12 'districts' ruled by the cruel, vengeful Capitol, which hoards resources for itself while the outlying regions suffer and starve. In retaliation for the conflict, the Capitol also runs an annual event called the Hunger Games, in which a male and female child from each district is selected to fight to the death for the entertainment of Capitol citizens. Despite this seemingly depressing synopsis, the movies earned more than \$3 billion worldwide, helped turn Jennifer Lawrence into a star and spawned a fresh fanbase that broadened the books' appeal.



It's no surprise, then, that when Collins published a prequel novel, *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes*, in 2020, it was an instant thought to reopen the world of Panem on screens in a story that turns the clock back 64 years before the events of the original film. We follow a young Coriolanus Snow (Tom Blyth), the man who will eventually become the cruel, calculating President Snow. Played by Donald Sutherland as an older man in the previous films, here he's a student at the Capitol's Academy, pushing to win a big prize that will help his struggling aristocratic family, which has fallen on tough times. When the rules of the prize change, Snow is pressed into becoming a mentor for a Hunger Games "tribute" (Rachel Zegler's musically inclined Lucy Gray Baird of District 12). He'll have to groom her into an entertaining combatant for the Games, but the two become closer as they work together, leading him to both question his own motivations and clash with those in power...

Speaking of turning back the clock, the idea to adapt the new novel was actually formed before it was published. With producer Nina Jacobson and director Francis Lawrence (the latter has handled all the movies since 2013's *Catching Fire*) back working with Collins again, the team hired Michael Arndt to start cracking the big-screen story. Arndt, who graduated from working as Matthew Broderick's assistant to winning an Oscar for his first produced screenplay (2006's *Little Miss Sunshine*), has some serious blockbuster experience, including the likes of *Toy Story 3* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. He was also—under the pseudonym Michael DeBruyn—brought in to take *Catching Fire* to and through production. He was, therefore, the ideal person to return to





MICHAEL ARNDT

the world of the *Hunger Games*. “They hired me, and [publisher] Scholastic had a copy of the manuscript,” Arndt says of gaining access to the source material. “They’re here in New York, and I live about a half a mile away. They had the manuscript locked in a safe, the same one I believe they used for the *Harry Potter* manuscripts. Every day, I would just ride my bike down to the offices, go into this one particular office, and they would unlock the safe. I would work on it all day long, and then they’d lock it up again.” Though Collins’ initial plan was for Arndt to work on the script after the book was published, he was already deep into the early stages of outlining and planning the first draft by the time of its release.

For the writer, the adapting process centers on carefully figuring out what to include and what needs to go. “I just listed all the major sequences of the book in what might have been an 8- or 10-page document, and then I did a strikethrough to show all the stuff I was going to cut,” Arndt says. “Honestly, with an adaptation like this, it’s a huge luxury as a writer that your characters and stories are all figured out. What you’re trying to do, especially with a book that’s 500 pages, is just trim it down so it can be turned into the running time of a movie and still be faithful to the characters, the story and the overall spirit of the book.” For some sequences, it meant combining moments, such as in the early scenes set at the elite Capitol Academy between Coriolanus and his friends (frenemies, in some cases) or in the zoo sequence

where the tributes are put on display before the Games, “There was more than one classroom scene, so you just composite it all down to a single classroom scene, and there’s more than one zoo scene, so you composite it all down to one zoo scene. The other thing is you’re trying to clarify the themes—or what’s philosophically at stake in the story—just to make things as clear as possible to help the audience.”

Asked to pinpoint the toughest scene to capture, he actually points to more of a concept, specifically getting the audience to empathize with Coriolanus, a character most know will turn into a dictator and, even in this film, starts to show questionable ethics. “He’s very poor, but he’s pretending to be rich. He’s hungry, but he’s pretending he’s had a lot to eat,” Arndt says. “That’s one of the things we struggled with, and we ended up just moving the introduction of the Plinth Prize [a sizable scholarship promised to the best performing student, which is then bait-and-switched to include participation as mentor in the Games] so that it ends up functioning as the inciting incident of the story. He’s just expecting—and everyone else expects him—to win because he’s kind of the star student, so to help people understand his motivations, we moved up the introduction of the prize from the one-third mark in the script all the way up to the very beginning.”







Collins was very focused on Snow in the book, to the point that Lucy Gray Baird vanishes for chunks of the arena clash that pits her against other tributes. The novel's plot essentially has her hiding out underground, but the filmmakers wanted to keep chronicling her struggles, thus Arndt was tasked with finding ways to do that. "This was a big addition to the story. I had to sit down and write out what she was doing and where she and [fellow District 12 tribute] Jessup (Nick Benson) went after the bell rang and how they were being stalked by the other tributes," he says. "I had to make up what the geography underneath the arena was." To solve the question, Arndt and the filmmakers came up with a conceit not in the book: the existence of security cameras in the subterranean layer of the arena. The solution, approved by Collins, allowed for more Lucy in the story without having to have Snow imagine what she was up to. He also invented a sequence where she made it up through a no longer used elevator to a skybox, where she could have a better view of what the other tributes were doing while still hiding. That idea, though, never made it to the shooting draft. "I would imagine that all just went away due to budget. There was just no way you could build all that up."

