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What Does it Mean to be Good?

Growing up and beginning to digest the world around you is not a simple task but we read our world and learn to translate that into how we live. Lessons are learned from the adults who surround us, the friends we make along the way and our experiences help shape us. Sometimes, depending on the scope of information one is privy to, there are certain real world details that people may choose to sweep under the rug. This can be especially true of facets concerning people or groups misusing their power, such as the government or characters in high positions. More so, depending on your immediate surroundings, information can be skewed, marred, and at worse, omitted. Given the current taut political climate in the United States, it becomes more necessary than ever to provide adolescents with the opportunity to learn and make their own judgments on what is a morally positive way to wield power. Giving them materials of young adult literature that deals with themes of government control and irresponsible power use can help them not only engage with texts and learn how to digest deeper themes, but to garner their own opinions on those who are in positions of power.

I started my selection process with novels I consumed in my youth that raptured me with their world building like *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins or that were easy to read due to their fast pace and character relatability like *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan. The important aspect of these novels is they deal with heavy themes of oppression from those in power, themes I myself did not recognize until I was in my late teens. The same goes for series like *The Shadow Children* by Margaret Peterson Haddix, a more overt exemplification of government control. *After the First Death* also carries themes of government control, but in a more subvert manner and using realistic fiction with Ben's suicide being driven

by the choices his father made that were ultimately driven by the government. The scale of how this theme gets represented is wide, but looking towards commonalities like using children as examples, or exercising fear to obtain control will shine a light on when it is present. It is an overarching similarity that through the loss of power, these protagonists gain a new and stronger sense of self that help them usually defeat the antagonist.

My goal is for young adults to look at these stories and realize that not only do they have power, but encourage them to use it. Being able to analyze characters who are morally grey and unfairly utilize their power is important for their own growth and self-preservation. They should form their own opinions on people who are put on pedestals and ensure they are maintaining their values.

Annotated Bibliography

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games Trilogy*. Scholastic, 2014.

- I have read all three of the novels in the series and the movies. *The Hunger Games Trilogy* traverses a post-apocalyptic dystopia where the Capitol forces two children from each district into a yearly reaping to compete in The Hunger Games. The series follows 16 year old Katniss Everdeen as she accidentally becomes the face of the revolution.
- This book not only exemplifies how governments can exercise control over their citizens to the point of death, but also how these systems are actually made weak by their lack of empathy. A common point brought up is that fear does not matter if people still have hope. We see young people, mostly in their late teens, eventually rise up to fight against the Capitol (their government) and advocate for a future that is brighter than the reality they have been subjected to. Between fighting for the rebellion and trying to stay alive, Katniss also deals with issues of identity, love and sacrifice. From learning to sacrifice herself to save her sister Prim from being in the games to the harsh lesson of letting others sacrifice themselves for a greater good, Katniss realizes that she can not do all the saving herself. Readers can hang on to the descriptive imagery and the jarring aspects of their dystopian world with ease, but might need to slow down to pick apart the depth of deception from the Capitol in the books. Beyond government control, readers can also relate to themes of found family, rebellion and freedom.

Riordan, Rick. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. New York, Disney Hyperion, 2005.

- I have read this book, seen the movie and the show. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* deals with 12 year old Percy's adventures, or misadventures, after finding out he is

a demigod - half human half Greek god. He is accused of stealing Zues' lightning bolt and has to embark on a quest in an attempt to retrieve it.

- Though there is not the traditional government in this book, there are figures with a lot of power, both literal and figurative. Being that it is only the first book in the series, the theme still goes through further development, but it is clear that the king of the Gods, Zues, maintains power over the other Gods and subsequently the human world below Olympus. Readers can learn that power is wielded by different kinds of positions that people hold, like Zues making a rule that himself, Poseidon, and Hades may not procreate with humans because the children they produce become too powerful and influence the human world greatly. This is a rule they all break! Percy confronts his issues head on, and he exemplifies a more straightforward manner of dealing with those in power. It is possible that he is also in a safer position to do so considering his uncle is Zues. The theme of control is light in the first novel, but themes of good versus evil, friendship and loyalty help build Percy's skill set and prepare him to face higher powers later in the series. It is important for readers to engage with imaginative narratives, especially those that are rooted in mythology. It helps them learn about other culture's history and the intense themes that come along with it in a manner that is easily digestible and fun.

Haddix, Margaret Peterson. *Among the Hidden*. New York, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2000.

- I have read this book and the others in the series though it was when I was in middle school. Suffering food shortages from a drought, the government in this dystopian world enact and enforce a rule where each family may only have two children. The first book in the seven book series follows our first shadow child, Luke, who spends his days out of

sight due to being the third born. One day, though, he glimpses an unfamiliar child in the window of a home that already has two children.

- Anti-government sentiment is rampant in this novel, and Peterson is able to do so by having another shadow child, Jen, expose her disapproval of the government to Luke.

This novel is an introductory course to what a lot of children actually go through, meeting new people who expand their worldview with ideals that have not been taught at home.

Friendship dominates this novel and really gives Luke the strength to break his parent's demands by going to see Jen and form a bond with her. The novel is also rather

suspenseful, adding a darker layer to the risks Luke and Jen take to meet with one

another. With Jen being so outspoken as another shadow child forced into hiding by the

government, Luke is able to form his own opinions applying what he knows and what he discovers through her. This is an example of how new people help expand our worldview,

though Luke does so while remaining true to his own personal values of staying safe.

Readers gain insight to the danger and possibility breaking the rules brings especially when it goes against the wishes of a totalitarian government.

Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. Collins Classics, 2021.

- I read this book in high school and watched the movie. *Animal Farm* is a satirical allegory where a farm full of animals overthrow the farmer, Mr. Jones, in order to create a new, animal centered society.
- I remember reading this book and thinking, 'that was crazy,' and truly, it is. The use of allegory is especially used and all the characters are based on actual figures from history. This novel is an exemplification of power being controlled from the inside and from the perspective of characters who already thought they had won the fight against oppression.

Then characters thought to be trusted used the moment of false security to place themselves in a better position. Orwell uses his characters to stress the want for power and the lengths the characters go to seize it are shocking. *Animal Farm* is important because it is not straight forward until you are able to analyze which animals represent which real life characters. It reminds me of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* the way animals are used to represent different groups of humans. For *Animal Farm*, the pigs are Russian revolutionists, Boxer the horse represents the Russian workers and Clover the horse represents Russian women and peasants. Readers can learn how fiction can accurately display real life events, even when retold through a lens that may seem silly at first. Taking the time to analyze the characters and digest what story is actually being told is important skill building as a reader. More so, it can help exemplify the struggle for power beyond its actual historical representation in a manner that is more interesting to young readers. Using real life allegory can help amplify the actual possibilities of power being used inappropriately - as it is reminded in *Animal Farm*, it has happened and it can again!

Mafi, Tahereh. *Shatter Me*. New York, Harper, 2011.

- I have not read this book. Resource taken from Good Reads, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/10429045-shatter-me>. *Shatter Me* follows 17-year-old Juliette who can kill anybody she touches for too long. Driven by the decisions of the Reestablishment, Juliette soon finds herself fighting for her freedom.
- Juliette's character is similar to that of Katniss, where she is traversing supreme government control and the fight to survive alongside figuring out love. Though it can come off as trivial, this dilemma is so important to explore given that love does come out in the most unexpected of times. Even when dealing with a prognosis that causes extreme

pain to anyone she touches, Juliette still deals with yearning and hope for something more intimate than friendship from her companion Adam. Taking themes of love and power struggle alongside a narrative driven by a corrupted government emphasises that life goes on despite these ongoing tragedies. It affirms that human nature is undeniable. Juliette is even able to utilize her own feminine power to seduce her captor, again emphasizing the power of self even in a fraught situation. Readers can garner a sense of power, reading how Juliette used aspects that were meant to control her to her own gain, standing up against her oppressors.

Cormier, Robert. *After the First Death* Avon, 1979.

- I have read this book. Told through multiple perspectives, *After the First Death* details the events after a terrorist group hijacks a bus full of children. The book primarily switches between the perspectives of three teenagers.
- This novel has a plethora of themes that deal with loss, tragedy and death. It questions moral ambiguity as the main narrators go between the innocent Kate, the not-so-innocent Miro and ghostly Ben. The utilization of all three perspectives can help readers learn how different moralities digest violence and death. Though there are smaller instances of control in this novel like Miro's leader who dictates Miro's life to Kate attempting to exercise self control, it is the more subverted example that shows another form of government control. Ben's father is high up in the government and it is through his position that he sends his own son into the hijacking situation in an attempt to barter with them. Though it was voluntary, Ben's father making the ultimate decision shows how controlling governments make people feel special in order to use them for their own personal advantage. The struggle of identity from Miro and Kate coupled with the

question of personal responsibility amplifies the wastefulness on the government's part using Ben. It is important for readers to learn that they have choice in perilous situations, and Ben's father not exercising choice shows the compliance many fall under when concerning their governments or those in higher positions of power.

Aveyard, Victoria. *Red Queen*. New York, HarperTeen, 2015.

- I have not read this book, though I do own it! Summary taken from Good Reads, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/22328546-red-queen>. *Red Queen* hosts a society that is divided by blood, either red or silver. It follows main character Mere Barrow after discovering she has the power to control electricity.
- *Red Queen* gives a classic example of a society divided into two with the separation being kept in place by those who benefit more from it. The Reds are controlled by the tyrannical Silvers. The Silvers maintain control through means of scare tactics and double standards. Tactics like these have been used historically in real life to keep the oppressed down and the oppressors in power. More so, though there are less Silvers than Reds, the Silvers maintain not only in power but in wealth while the Reds are impoverished. Keeping the Reds in a place of food and money disparity feeds their insecurities and makes it simpler for them to comply with the Silver's whims. Following Mere's adventure of faking her status as a highly regarded and long lost Silver, she secretly plots against them and with a militant resistant group. Again, we see the power of characters taking their lives into their own hands and using their special circumstance to covertly rise above and take over those in power. The exciting plot makes readers eager to learn more and figure out if Mere can succeed in her journey.

Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. HarperCollins, 2014.

- I have read this book though it was a long time ago. *The Giver* is told through Jonas, an eleven year old living in a futuristic society with little prejudice since everyone looks and acts the same.
- *The Giver* exemplifies an idealistic society where everything seems perfect. This is a larger lesson in everything is not as it seems, similar to tropes explored in previously discussed novels like *Percy Jackson* and *Red Queen*. Though preaching peace and equality, the government is controlled by a small group of people who ultimately make the decisions for everyone else. Very similar to *Red Queen* right above! Jonas' job begins to bring up the issue of mass control versus striving for individual freedom. Readers will be able to learn that there is a cost to perfection and more often than not it is the individual who pays the price, giving up their sense of self. Jonas learns that there is also moral ambiguity in the methodology of the government and how they control the memories and free will of its citizens. I think this book will eventually be considered a classic, and given its widespread popularity, it is with good faith that it has earned its spot. Jonas' young age can help even younger readers begin to understand the price of self preservation in the face of powerful oppression. His young age also demonstrates how children deal with high level trauma and are able to discern it rather young.

Dashner, James. *The Maze Runner*. Chicken House, 2010.

- I have read this book and have seen the movie. Trapped in a giant maze with no recollection of their memories, Thomas yearns to become a coveted maze runner and not die while doing it.
- Similar to *The Hunger Games* the reach and intensity of government control is not very clear at the beginning. Though it is obvious that the boys in the maze got there somehow,

they do not remember, which reminds me of Katniss originally going through the emotions of the reaping keeping her thoughts about the Capitol to herself. Also similar to Katniss, Thomas finds himself in a slew of intensity due to decisions made by others, not of his own accord. Even if it is not by choice, Thomas is able to thrive by working hard and outsmarting those around him. Thomas' drive for survival can be inspiring for readers, and the eventual reveal of the government's involvement is effective in its drama. The presence of control and its use before the reveal is exemplified by how the boys set up their own little society in the maze. The lessons and strength gained through their self-government will help them face the actual issue of the disease that caused their apocalyptic society. Thomas has shown extreme tenacity and loyalty even in the face of hardship which can inspire young readers to take the lessons learned and keep them handy in case you need them in the future.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic, 1999.

- I have read this book and have seen the movie. Harry Potter learns that he is a wizard and is sent to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry where he uncovers the truth about his parent's deaths through the power of friendship.
- Though the extent of government corruption is not in the limelight until later in the series, the first book sets the stage for giving Harry the tools he needs to traverse those future difficulties. Having yearly encounters with Voldemort, Harry is rather sure of his existence. However, the adults and people around him are afraid of this reality and do well to deny, deny, deny. Though this is happening, Harry and his friends have a magical journey where he grows as not only a friend, but as a wizard. The Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge who is basically the wizarding world's president, denies the return of

Voldemort for five books. This causes distress for Harry as it paints him to be a liar, and it makes it so he has a lack of resources when it comes to facing Voldemort, an extremely powerful wizard himself. Fudge's dishonesty and dismissal of children exemplify the power children hold. Fudge was afraid of Voldemort and instead of helping, cowarded, even with the power of the wizarding world at his hands. Harry can show readers the power of friendship and truth in the face of adversity, even from people who are meant to help you.