the GIVER

“A powerful and provocative novel.”—The New York Times

LOIS LOWRY
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The Giver
By Lois Lowry

Reader's Guide

1. In The Giver, each family has two parents, a son, and a daughter. The relationships are not biological but are developed through observation and a careful handling of personality. In our own society, the makeup of family is under discussion. How are families defined? Are families the foundations of a society, or are they continually open for new definitions?

2. In Jonas’s community, every person and his or her experience are precisely the same. The climate is controlled, and competition has been eliminated in favor of a community in which everyone works only for the common good. What advantages might “Sameness” yield for contemporary communities? Is the loss of diversity worthwhile?

3. Underneath the placid calm of Jonas’s society lies a very orderly and inexorable system of euthanasia, practiced on the very young who do not conform, the elderly, and those whose errors threaten the stability of the community. What are the disadvantages and benefits of a community that accepts such a vision of euthanasia?

4. Why is the relationship between Jonas and The Giver dangerous, and what does this danger suggest about the nature of love?

5. The ending of The Giver may be interpreted in two very different ways. Perhaps Jonas is remembering his Christmas memory—one of the most beautiful that The Giver transmitted to him—as he and Gabriel are freezing to death, falling into a dreamlike coma in the snow. Or perhaps Jonas does hear music and, with his special vision, is able to perceive the warm house where people are waiting to greet him. In her acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal, Lois Lowry mentioned both possibilities but would not choose one as correct. What evidence supports each interpretation?

6. There are groups in the United States today that actively seek to maintain an identity outside the mainstream culture: the Amish, the Mennonites, Native American tribes, and the Hasidic Jewish community. What benefits do these groups expect from defining themselves as “other”? What are the disadvantages? How does the mainstream culture put pressure on such groups?

7. Lois Lowry helps create an alternate world by having the community use words in a special way. Though that world stresses what it calls “precision of language,” in fact it is built upon language that is not precise but deliberately clouds meaning. What is the danger of such misleading language?
8. Examine the ways in which Jonas’s community uses euphemism to distance itself from the reality of “Release.” How does our own society use euphemism to distance us from such realities as aging and death, bodily functions, and political activities? What are the benefits and disadvantages of such uses of language?

Prepared by Gary D. Schmidt, Department of English, Calvin College

**SUGGESTED READING**

**Related Titles**

*The Chocolate War*
Robert Cormier
0-440-94459-7

*Island of the Blue Dolphins*
Scott O’Dell
0-440-94000-1

*A Wrinkle in Time*
Madeleine L’Engle
0-440-99805-0

*Gathering Blue*
Lois Lowry
0-440-22949-9
Lois Lowry
1937-

Nationality: American
Place of Birth: Honolulu, HI
Genre(s): Children's fiction; Literary criticism and history

Award(s):
Children's Literature Award, International Reading Association, 1978, for A Summer to Die; American Library Association Notable Book citation, 1980, for Autumn Street; American Book Award nomination (juvenile paperback category), 1983, for Anastasia Again!; Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, Golden Kite Award, and Child Study Award, Children's Book Committee of Bank Street College, all 1987, all for Rabble Starkey; Newbery Medal, National Jewish Book Award, and Sidney Taylor Award, National Jewish Libraries, all 1990, all for Number the Stars; Newbery Medal, American Library Association, 1994, for The Giver; RA/CBC Children's Choice citation, 1997, for See You around, Sam!


Career: Freelance writer and photographer, 1972--.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:
JUVENILE NOVELS

A Summer to Die, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1977.
Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1978.
Anastasia Krupnik, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1979.
Autumn Street, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1979.
Anastasia Again!, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1981.
Anastasia at Your Service, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1982.
Taking Care of Terrific, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1983.
Anastasia Ask Your Analyst, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1984.
Us and Uncle Fraud, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1984.
One Hundredth Thing about Caroline, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1985.
Anastasia on Her Own, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1985.  
Switcharound, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1985.  
Anastasia Has the Answers, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1986.  
Rabble Starkey, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1987.  
Anastasia's Chosen Career, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1987.  
All about Sam, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1988.  
Number the Stars, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1989.  
Your Move J.P.!, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1990.  
Anastasia at This Address, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1991.  
Attaboy, Sam!, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1992.  
The Giver, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1993.  
Anastasia, Absolutely, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1995.  
See You around, Sam!, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1996.  
Stay!: Keeper's Story, illustrated by True Kelley, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1997.  
Zooman Sam, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1999.  
Gathering Blue, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2000.  

OTHER  
Literature of the American Revolution (textbook), J. Weston Walsh, 1974.  
(And photographer) Looking Back: A Photographic Memoir (autobiography), Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1998.  
Also author of introduction to Dear Author: Students Write about the Books That Changed Their Lives, Conari Press, 1995.  
Contributor of stories, articles, and photographs to periodicals, including Redbook, Yankee, and Down East.  

Media Adaptations: Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye was made into the Afterschool Special "I Don't Know Who I Am," 1980; Taking Care of Terrific was televised on "Wonderworks," 1988. Anastasia at Your Service was recorded on audiocassette, Learning Library, 1984; Anastasia Krupnik was made into a filmstrip, Cheshire, 1987.  

"Sidelights"  
Lois Lowry was born in 1937 in Honolulu, Hawaii. At the time of her birth, Lowry's father, a career army officer, was stationed at Schofield Barracks near Pearl Harbor. The family separated with the onset of World War II, and Lowry spent the duration of the war with her mother's family in the Amish Country of Pennsylvania. Her grandmother wasn't especially fond of children, but her grandfather adored her, and Lowry escaped the absolute trauma of war under the shelter of his affection. Much later, Lowry's wartime experience inspired her fourth novel, Autumn Street. As an author, Lowry has often translated her life into fiction for the purpose of helping others who may have suffered under similar circumstances. She once commented that she gauges her success as a writer by her ability to "help adolescents answer their own questions about life, identity and human relationships."
Lowry's books have dealt with topics ranging from the death of a sibling and the Nazi occupation of Denmark, to the humorous antics of the rebellious Anastasia Krupnik, to futuristic dystopian societies. In her first novel, A Summer to Die, Lowry portrays an adolescent's struggle with her older sister's illness and eventual death. When the Chalmers family moves to the country for the summer, thirteen-year-old Meg and fifteen-year-old Molly are forced to share a room. Already jealous of her older sister, Meg becomes increasingly argumentative and resentful when her sister's recurring nosebleeds become the focus of her parents' attention. As her sister's condition deteriorates, Meg realizes that Molly is slowly dying of leukemia. For friendship, she turns to old Will Banks, a neighbor who encourages her interest in photography, and Ben and Maria, a hippie couple who invite Meg to take pictures at the birth of their child.

A Summer to Die was well received by critics. The "story captures the mysteries of living and dying without manipulating the reader's emotions, providing understanding and a comforting sense of completion," observed Linda R. Silver in School Library Journal. Tragically, Lowry's sympathy for Meg and Molly was drawn from life. Her older sister, Helen, died of cancer when Lowry was twenty-five. "Very little of [A Summer to Die] was factual," she once commented, "except the emotions." The author added: "When my mother read the book she recognized the characters as my sister and me. She knew that the circumstances in the book were very different, but the characters had great veracity for her."

Following her successful debut as a novelist, Lowry continued to explore challenging adolescent topics. She documented an adopted child's search for her biological mother in Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye. Although neither Lowry nor any of her children are adopted, she felt that the subject was important enough to be dealt with at length. She explained: "Maybe it's because of having watched my own kids go through the torture of becoming adults . . . that I think those kinds of issues are important and it's important to deal with them in a sensitive and compassionate way."

Memories of her childhood as well as her experiences as a parent have led Lowry to her most popular character: Anastasia Krupnik, the spunky, rebellious, and irreverent adolescent who stars in a series of books that began in 1979. "Until I was about twelve I thought my parents were terrific, wise, wonderful, beautiful, loving, and well-dressed," the author confessed. "By age twelve and a half they turned into stupid boring people with whom I did not want to be seen in public. . . . That happens to all kids, and to the kids in my books as well." In the first book of the series, Anastasia Krupnik, the ten-year-old heroine faces numerous comic crises, including a crush on a boy who is continually dribbling an imaginary basketball, and the coming arrival of a baby sibling. With the passing of each crisis Anastasia gains new insight into herself; by the book's close she is prepared to move on to a new level of maturity. "Anastasia's feelings and discoveries should be familiar to anyone who has ever been ten," noted Brad Owens in Christian Science Monitor, "and author Lois Lowry has a sensitive way of taking problems seriously without ever being shallow or leaning too far over into despair."
The broad audience appeal of the first Anastasia book prompted Lowry to write another novel featuring her diminutive heroine. "I have the feeling she's going to go on forever—or until I get sick of her, which hasn't happened yet. I'm still very fond of her and her whole family," Lowry remarked. Subsequent titles include Anastasia Again! and Anastasia at Your Service, in which a twelve-year-old Anastasia finds a summer job serving as maid to a rich, elderly woman, who turns out to be a classmate's grandmother. Anastasia must deal with the embarrassment of working for the family of a well-to-do peer. "Despite differences the girls become friends; and with the help of Anastasia's precocious brother Sam, they generate a plot that is rich, inviting, and very funny," noted Barbara Elleman in a Booklist review. The popular Anastasia went on to appear in numerous additional titles, including Anastasia, Ask Your Analyst, Anastasia on Her Own, Anastasia Has the Answers, and Anastasia's Chosen Career.

Lowry's fiction resumed a serious tone with the publication of Rabble Starkey. The twelve-year-old female protagonist Parable Ann ("Rabble") was born when her mother was fourteen. She and her mother now live with the Bigelow family while Mrs. Bigelow is hospitalized for mental illness. The care of Mrs. Bigelow's infant son, Gunther, falls primarily on the shoulders of Rabble and the Bigelow's daughter Veronica. "Their adventures meld into a warm and often surprising chronicle of small-town life," asserted a Publishers Weekly reviewer. "Secure in the Bigelow household, Rabble hopes for a better future." The Children's Book Committee of Bank Street College found the book equally appealing, awarding Rabble Starkey its Child Study Award in 1987.

In 1990 Lowry received the Newbery Medal for her distinguished contribution to children's literature with Number the Stars. Based on a factual account, the story is set against the backdrop of Nazi-occupied Denmark. Ten-year-old Annemarie Johansen and her family are drawn into the resistance movement, shuttling Jews from Denmark into neutral Sweden. (During the Second World War this type of heroism insured the survival of nearly all of Denmark's Jews.) Newbery Committee Chair Caroline Ward was quoted by School Library Journal: "Lowry creates suspense and tension without wavering from the viewpoint of Annemarie, a child who shows the true meaning of courage."

Lowry received the prestigious Newbery Medal a second time for her 1993 novel The Giver. In this radical departure from her previous works, Lowry creates a futuristic utopian world where every aspect of life--birth, death, families, career choices, emotions, even the weather--is strictly controlled in order to create a safe and comfortable community with no fear or violence. Jonas is twelve years old and is looking forward to an important rite of passage: the ceremony in which he, along with all children his age, will be assigned a life's vocation. Jonas is bewildered when he is skipped during the ceremony, but it is because he has been selected for a unique position. Jonas will become the new Receiver, the prestigious and powerful person who holds all the memories of the community. In his lessons with the old Receiver, whom Jonas calls the Giver, Jonas begins learning about the things--memories, emotions, and knowledge--that the community has given up in favor of peacefulness. At first, these memories are pleasant: images of snow, colors, feelings of love. But then Jonas encounters the darker aspects of human experience--war, death, and pain--and discovers that community members who
are "Released" are actually being euthanized. This discovery leads Jonas to escape from the community with his young foster brother Gabriel. In an interestingly ambiguous ending, readers can decide for themselves whether the boys have safely reached "Elsewhere," been intercepted by their community's security forces, or died from hunger and exposure.

While some reviewers believed younger readers might be disappointed by the ambiguous ending, Lowry maintained that there is no single "right" ending to the novel. As she said in her Newbery Medal acceptance speech, reprinted in Horn Book: "There's a right one for each of us, and it depends on our own beliefs, on our own hopes. . . . Most of the young readers who have written to me have perceived the magic of the circular journey. The truth that we go out and come back, and that what we come back to is changed, and so are we." Five Owls contributor Gary D. Schmidt found the ending most appropriate, explaining that with it "the reader must do what Jonas must now do for the first time: make a choice." Patty Campbell in Horn Book called The Giver "a book so unlike what has gone before, so rich in levels of meaning, so daring in complexity of symbol and metaphor, so challenging in the ambiguity of its conclusion, that we are left with all our neat little everyday categories and judgments hanging useless." Karen Ray, in a New York Times Book Review appraisal, found The Giver to be "powerful and provocative," while a Kirkus Reviews critic similarly concluded: "Wrought with admirable skill--the emptiness and menace underlying this Utopia emerge step by inexorable step: a richly provocative novel."

Gathering Blue, which a Publishers Weekly reviewer hailed as a "dark, prophetic tale with a strong medieval flavor," is a sequel, or companion piece, to The Giver. Rather than depicting a technologically advanced society, however, Lowry here describes a technologically primitive world in which, as she states in her author's note, "disorder, savagery, and self-interest" rule. As in The Giver, a child is chosen to play a special role in this society. Kira was born with a twisted leg--a condition that would normally have resulted in her being put to death as a baby. But she was somehow allowed to live. Kira sews beautifully, and is chosen to be The Threader, whose duty it is to create the robe of The Singer, a garment that depicts the history of the world and is used in the annual ritual of the Gathering. In this role, however, Kira begins to learn the dark secrets beneath her society's rules and must make a life-altering choice. Many reviewers praised the novel for its sensitive handling of serious themes. Kay Bowes in Book Report considered it "thought-provoking" and "challenging," while a Horn Book writer observed that it "shares the thematic concerns of The Giver . . . [but] adds a layer of questions about the importance of art in creating and, more ominously, controlling community." Ellen Fader, in School Library Journal, concluded that "Lowry has once again created a fully-realized world. . . . Readers won't forget these memorable characters or their struggles in an inhospitable world."

With many accomplishments in the field of children's literature to her credit, Lowry reflected on her career: "I remember the feeling of excitement that I had, the first time that I realized each letter had a sound and the sounds went together to make words, and the words became sentences and the sentences became stories. . . . Now, when I write, I
draw a great deal from my own past. There is a satisfying sense of continuity, for me, in
the realization that my own experiences, fictionalized, touch young readers in subtle and
very personal ways."

**FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**BOOKS**
Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults, Beacham Publishing (Osprey, FL),

Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 52: American Writers for Children since 1960:
Fiction, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1987, pp. 249-261.

Green, Carol Hurd, and Mary Grimley Mason, editors, American Women Writers,

Lowry, Lois, Looking Back: A Photographic Memoir, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA),
1998.

Silvey, Anita, editor, Children's Books and Their Creators, Houghton Mifflin (Boston,
MA), 1995.

St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers, 2nd edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI),
1999.

**PERIODICALS**
Booklist, October 15, 1979, Barbara Elleman, review of Anastasia Krupnik, p. 354; April
15, 1980, p. 1206; September 1, 1982, Barbara Elleman, review of Anastasia at Your
Service, p. 46; September 1, 1987, pp. 66-67; March 1, 1989, p. 1194; March 1, 1990,
Ilene Cooper, review of Your Move, J. P.!, p. 1345; April 1, 1991, Stephanie Zvirin,
review of Anastasia at This Address, p. 1564; April 15, 1993, p. 1506; June 1, 2000, Ilene
Cooper, review of Gathering Blue, p. 1896; August 2001, Elaine Hanson, review of
Gathering Blue (audio version), p. 2142.


Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, January, 1980, Zena Sutherland, review of
Anastasia Krupnik, p. 99; May, 1984, Zena Sutherland, review of Anastasia, Ask Your
Analyst, p. 169; May, 1985, p. 70; October, 1988, pp. 46-47; March, 1990, Ruth Ann
Smith, review of Your Move, J. P.!, p. 169; April, 1993, p. 257; September, 1995,
Deborah Stevenson, review of Anastasia, Absolutely, pp. 20-21; November, 1996, p. 105;


Junior Bookshelf, August, 1979, Mary Hobbs, review of A Summer to Die, pp. 224-225; August, 1980, p. 194.


School Librarian, February, 1995, pp. 31-32.


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Gale Database: Contemporary Authors

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