



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 wrong 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 that he didn’t understand.

In chapter 22:

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

Now he was. If he had stayed in the community, he would not be. It was as simple as that. Once he had yearned for choice. Then, when he had had a choice, he had made the wrong one: the choice to leave. And now he was starving.

But if he had stayed ...

His thoughts continued. If he had stayed, he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for colour, for love.

And Gabriel? For Gabriel there would have been no life at all. So there had not really been a choice.

You might use question like:

- What are your thoughts on these quotes?
- Why do you think the Giver and Jonas think it is dangerous for people to choose their own jobs? Do you think having choices could ever be dangerous? Explain.
- Is it possible to protect someone from wrong choices? Explain.
- Are there ways to make sure people do not hurt themselves by making bad choices? Explain.
- Have you ever been in a situation when someone else made a decision for you or chose something on your behalf? If so, how did it feel? Did you feel safe, as Jonas and the Giver suggest? Does it feel different depending on the context? Explain.
- Do you think we may be ‘choosing’ even in situations where we are ‘not choosing’?
- Do you think giving up certain freedoms might bring benefits? How would you decide if it was worth it? Are there any freedoms that are too important to ever give up? Explain.
- What about others’ freedom? Do we have a responsibility to protect the freedom of others?

b. Pain and painkillers

In Chapter 14:

“May I have relief-of-pain, please?” he begged. It was always provided in his everyday life for the bruises and wounds, for a mashed finger, a stomach ache, a skinned knee from a fall from a bike. There was always a daub of anesthetic ointment, or a pill; or in severe instances, an injection that brought complete and instantaneous deliverance.

But The Giver said no, and looked away.

Limping, Jonas walked home, pushing his bicycle, that evening. The sunburn pain had been so small, in comparison, and had not stayed with him. But his ache lingered.

It was not unendurable, as the pain on the hill had been. Jonas tried to be brave. He remembered that the Chief Elder had said he was brave.

“Is something wrong, Jonas?” his father asked at the evening meal. “You’re so quiet tonight. Aren’t 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 for sharing-of-feelings, 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 from behind the closed door 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 he rubbed his throbbing leg. He eventually slept. Again and again he dreamed of the anguish and the isolation on the forsaken hill.

You might use question like:

- 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?
- 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.
- 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.
- 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?
- 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:

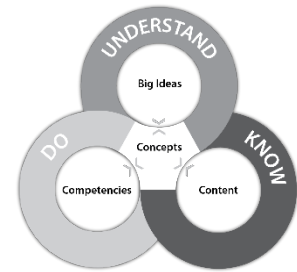
- Living without choice – explore a life in which you never had to make a choice, and try to reflect both the benefits and costs to the individual or community
- Dealing with “what if” – explore the issue of consequences in the life of an individual or community, reflecting on our tendency to think “what if I had chosen differently...?” and present a resolution to the tension
- 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
- 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

- Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- 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

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

Links to Curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

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

English Language Arts 6-8

Big ideas

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



Competencies

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