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1. AT A GLANCE – THE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS

This study guide to Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is designed to provide an easy-to-use overview of the structure, context, themes and characters of the novel. Here is a quick rundown of the most important points.

Part 2 takes a brief look at **Lois Lowry and her career**.

- ⇒ p. 9 → Lowry was **born in Hawaii in 1937**. Her father worked for the **US military**, so like many other military families they moved around the world a lot from base to base.
- ⇒ p. 11 → She wrote her first novel in 1977 and *The Giver* in the early 1990s. Its **contemporary background** is interesting but actually less relevant to the book itself than is frequently the case, in particular for dystopias or SF.

Part 3 provides analyses and interpretations of the novel.

***The Giver* – Origins and Sources:**

- ⇒ p. 23 We have in Lowry's 1994 *Newbery Medal* acceptance speech an unusually detailed and open discussion of the precise influences and inspirations which combined to form *The Giver*.

Summaries:

- ⇒ p. 30 Jonas is about to turn 12, at which point he and all other children his age will be given their Assignments, telling them what their future role in society will be. He is selected as Receiver of Memory, an unique and mysterious position. He trains with an old man called The Giver who is the only person in the community who has access

2.1 Biography

2. LOIS LOWRY: LIFE & WORKS

2.1 Biography

YEAR	PLACE	EVENT	AGE
1937	Honolulu/ Hawaii (USA)	20th of March: Lois (originally Cena) Lowry is born. She is the middle child of three. Her parents are Norwegian (father) and German, English, Scots-Irish (mother).	
1939	Brooklyn/New York (USA)	Her father was a dentist in the US military and like many military families, they had to move often. This was the first relocation of Lois' life.	2
1942	Carlisle/ Pennsylvania (USA)	When her father had to serve on a hospital ship in the Pacific during World War 2, the rest of the family moved back to Lois' mother's hometown.	5
1948– 1950	Tokyo (Japan)	Her father was stationed in Japan and the family lived on a military base for a couple of years. Lois returned to the US to attend high school.	11–13
1954– 1956	Providence/ Rhode Island (USA)	Lois studied at Pembroke College for two years until she married Donald Lowry.	17–19



Lois Lowry
(*1937)
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Moore¹

¹ 2016 Larry D. Moore CC BY-SA 4.0 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lois_Lowry_2016.jpg

2.2 Contemporary Background

2.2 Contemporary Background

Lois Lowry wrote *The Giver* in the early 1990s. She had already been a professional writer for nearly 20 years by that time. It is maybe surprising for a writer to have their most famous and critically acclaimed work come in the middle of their careers, rather than in an explosion of energy at the beginning or as a crowning achievement towards the end.

SUMMARY

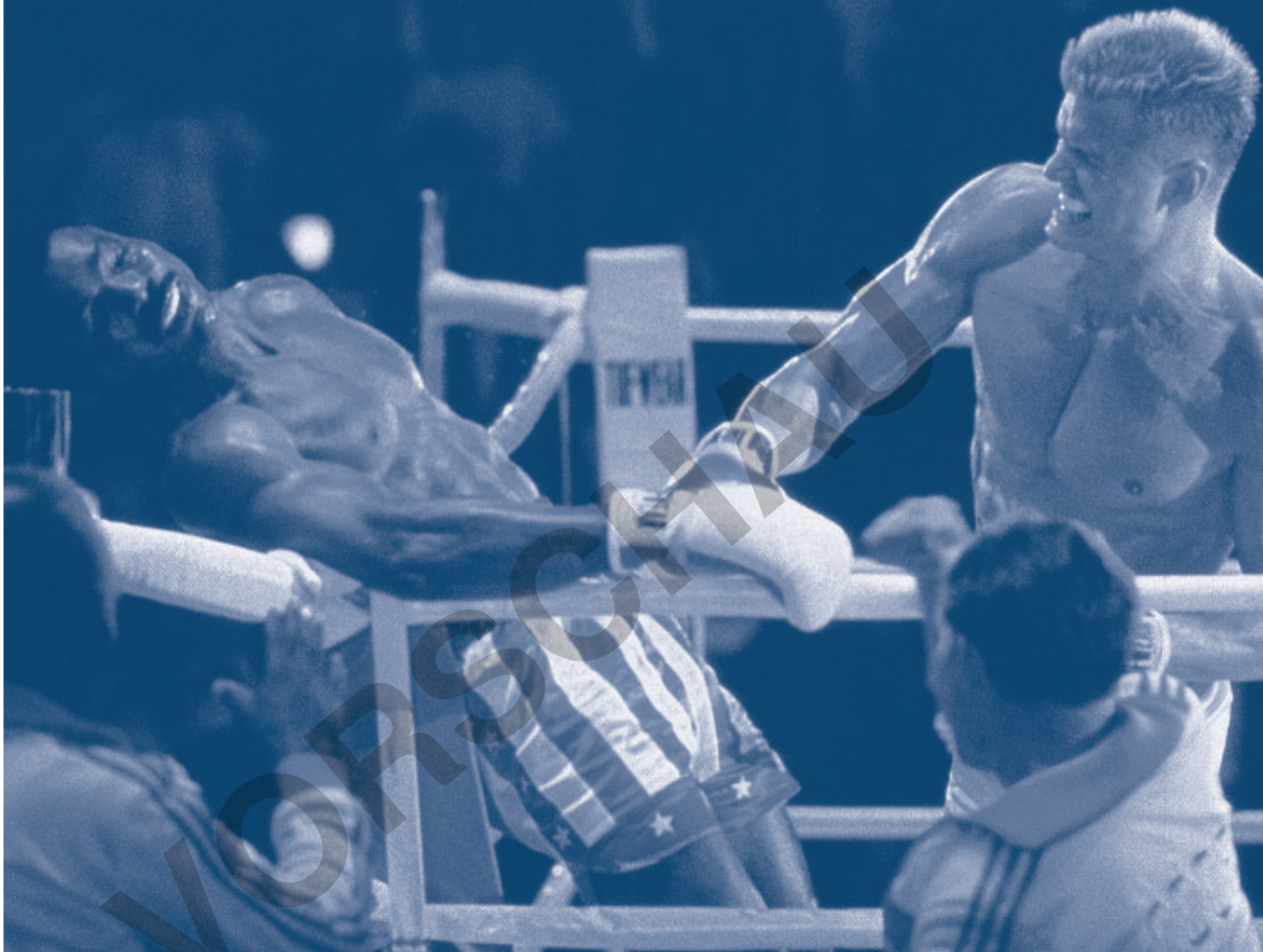
The 1990s and the “end of history”

The early 1990s were a strange time in history. Following the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the **reunification of Germany**, many people thought that the world had reached what was called “the end of history”. This was a philosophical idea made popular by Francis Fukuyama 1992 in his bestselling book *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama’s idea, very basically, is that Western-style liberal democracy had “won” the competition between different political and social systems, and that from this point on all people and countries would be increasingly on the same path to shared **enlightenment, progress, peace and security**. Formerly competing ideologies like Communism and extreme nationalism would become weaker and would vanish into history.

End of the Cold
War

But this view of the world turned out to be premature and optimistic. Within just a couple of years it was clear that rampant nationalism was still widespread, China’s capitalist-Communist hybrid system was becoming an increasing concern for Western nations, and globalised terrorism had a historic comeback in the public eye with al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks. By the turn of the millennium Fukuyama’s theories seemed quaint and lost to history.

2.2 Contemporary Background

**Pop culture: Hybridisation and self-awareness**

In pop culture, **the 1990s** saw the beginning of a widespread process of fusion and hybridisation. This occurred in cinema, music and literature. **Previously underground or subcultural musical genres became increasingly mainstream** – this was most dominantly and lastingly true of hip hop, which in the 1980s was seen by the mainstream as being a gimmick or an underground phenomenon, and is now possibly the single most popular pop music genre in the world.

Movie scene from
Rocky IV (1985)
with Dolph Lundgren as Soviet
boxer Ivan Drago.
© picture alliance/
Everett Collection

3. ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS

3.1 Origins and Sources

Lowry's inspirations and sources for *The Giver* were her own memories and her thoughts about how memory works. The other major themes of conflict and individualism are also drawn from her own experience and thoughts about life. In her 1994 *Newbery Medal* acceptance speech, Lowry gave an unusually detailed and thoughtful account of the accumulated inspirations and origins of the book.

SUMMARY

In her acceptance speech when she was awarded the *Newbery Medal*¹⁰ for the second time in 1994, Lois Lowry spoke in detail about things from her own life which had influenced *The Giver*. She uses **a river as a metaphor for a life**, for the accumulation of memories and influences, and for the idea of the past and the passage of time itself. She quotes from *The Giver*, a scene where Jonas looks at a river and “the history it contained ... there was an Elsewhere from which it came, and an Elsewhere to which it was going”¹¹. She then uses this idea of “Jonas looking into the river and realizing that it carries with it everything that has come from an Elsewhere” as an expression of “the origins of this book”. Staying with the river metaphor, Lowry says that the individual memories she is about to discuss are like tributaries (small streams which flow into a river to increase it in size) which have contributed not only to the river

The river

10 www.walden.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Newbery_Award.pdf

11 Chapter 17: p. 102.31–34.

3.1 Origins and Sources

of her life, but to the river which was the creative process which became/gave birth to *The Giver*.

Lowry's Newbery Medal

It is relatively **unusual for a writer to talk so openly and in such detail about the specific events**, feelings and situations which contributed to creating something. This is not just because of shyness or a desire for privacy or wanting to cultivate an aura of mystery: it is probably very often also just because a lot of writers aren't able to precisely identify where and how their ideas developed and grew, and what the original seeds of an idea actually were. Lowry's *Newbery Medal* acceptance speech is therefore an interesting and rare example of a writer talking very openly and in great detail about the specific details of how an idea grew over the years to become a novel.

Note:

Pay attention to the repeated mantra of "comfortable, familiar, safe" throughout the speech: this is something Lois Lowry has identified as a common thread throughout all these memories, and which is one key to *The Giver*.

These are **the memories and inspirations** Lois Lowry talks about in her 1994 acceptance speech:

→ When she was 11 years old in 1948, Lois moved with her family to **Tokyo in Japan**. They lived in an entirely American environment. Later as an adult she asked her mother why they hadn't tried to interact more with Japanese people and learn more about the culture and the country, and her mother is surprised. "She said that we lived where we did because it was comfortable. It was familiar. It was safe." Driven by curiosity, 11-year old Lois rode her bike out of the American area into another part of Tokyo, where she was overwhelmed by the

3.5 Themes

TEXT	REFERENCE (P.)	ANALYSIS
"[...] Jonas was beginning to be frightened. No. Wrong word [...] frightened was the wrong word to describe his feelings [...]. It was too strong an adjective. [...] <i>Apprehensive</i> , Jonas decided. That's what I am.	9–11	Opening sentence, precision of language: frightened vs. apprehensive
"[...] IMMEDIATELY, the rasping voice through the speakers had said."	9.21–22	Orders are given through speakers which everyone must obey.
"Jonas was careful about language."	10.29	precision of language
"Do you love me?"	100.4–23	Jonas asks his parents if they love him and is told off for not using precise language.

→ The pills

Drug control

The pills are some undetermined kind of sedative which everyone in the Community must take, starting with puberty and continuing for their entire life. The pills are taken unquestioningly by everyone. They are **one of the strongest and most sinister methods of control** used in this society, because they help to repress and extinguish feelings and instincts which are necessary to establish emotional bonds with other people, such as love (of a romantic or non-romantic nature).

3.5 Themes

Here are some more examples of the rules and regulations and routines which guide and structure the lives of the citizens:

TEXT	REFERENCE (P.)	ANALYSIS
"I apologize for inconveniencing my learning community."	11.3	Everyone controls everyone else, by communicating in formulaic phrases and routines, and by participating in rituals of relatively shallow discussion of feelings and dreams.
"Who wants to be first tonight, for feelings? [...] It was one of the rituals, the evening telling of feelings."	12.1–3	
"Two children – one male, one female – to each family unit. It was written very clearly in the rules."	14.25–26	
"This evening he almost would have preferred to keep his feelings hidden. But it was, of course, against the rules."	15.14–15	
December and the Ceremonies	16	We learn here that everyone in the Community ages at the same time: in December there is a two-day Ceremony, with events for each of the years of childhood from One to Twelve. After the Ceremony of Twelve "age isn't important" (20.26).

3.6 Style and Language

Here are some **examples of the euphemisms used in the book.**

EUPHEMISM USED IN <i>THE GIVER</i>	EXAMPLES (P.)	MEANING OF THE WORD OR PHRASE
Release	29.34; 92.1–13	Planned death – euthanasia. This is a death which is intended to purge the community of unwanted people – “inadequate” children or people who are too old to be of any further use and who would only be a burden on others. It is also used as a form of suicide, as happened with The Giver’s daughter Rosemary (see pp. 110–111). In a sinister note which only becomes fully apparent on re-reading the book, the first chapter opens with an airplane pilot mistakenly flying over the Community after having “misread his navigational instructions and made a wrong turn. [...] NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WILL BE RELEASED” (10.6–11).
Receive	40.14–28	When a family unit is given a newborn baby to raise as their child.
Family unit	“how she would fit into their established family unit” (17.12–13)	Family units are not quite like families as we know them. The babies and children are not born within these families: they are allocated to them after having been born to Birthmothers and raised by Nurturers. To view things from the perspective of the Community: They are planned by the Committee of Elders and organised with care to avoid the mess and chaos which unplanned, emotional choices would have caused. They are “units” within a larger whole, small models of the Community itself – well-organised and structured groups of people who have been Assigned to one another to maximise peace and efficiency.

3.6 Style and Language

Lost meaning

“Animal”: someone who doesn’t fit in

The language used in the novel is not just characterised by its use as a **control system** (“Precision of language”) or as **euphemisms** for taboo subjects. There are also example of how words have lost their meaning, which tells us a lot about this future society. An early example in the book is the use of the word “animal” (p. 12.21–28). Lily is complaining about visitors from another Community and how they behaved differently, which annoyed her. She struggles to find the right word to describe the impression they made on her, and Jonas suggests “animals”: everyone laughs. They don’t know what the word means, but it is used to describe someone who doesn’t fit in.

We learn a couple of important things here quite early on. The first is that this is apparently a world in which **there are no more animals**. This is quite startling, and later, when The Giver tells Jonas more about the history of the world and about the ancient events which led to humanity choosing Sameness, which included pollution, wars and climate catastrophes, we can piece together from clues that animal life must have been exterminated either by accident or deliberately. After escaping, Jonas sees birds outside the Community, so we can assume that the absence of animals is something which has affected and been accepted by this Community, but is not a global condition.

Sameness

The other things this tells us is how low the Community’s opinion is of people who are in any way different and whose behaviour or manner is in any way **different from the standard** mildness and politeness practised by the citizens. The casual contempt tells us how effectively this society has conditioned its citizens **to fear and dislike any kind of deviation from established norms and rules of behaviour**. The ease with which these two children, in this example, can literally dehumanise strangers tells us a lot about the society which allows Jonas’ father, a Nurturer and child care specialist by

3.7 Approaches to Interpretation

3.7 Approaches to Interpretation

The Giver is a dystopian science fiction novel for young adults. Dystopian literature is about the here and now. It is always a warning – about what the consequences could be of developments and processes the author sees at work in his or her own time and environment.

SUMMARY

The Giver can be categorised in at least three genres: **Young Adult fiction (YA)**, **science fiction (SF)** and **dystopian fiction**. These three terms are all used to describe genres these days, but should be treated with care.

Young adult (YA) fiction

YA fiction is considered a kind of stepping stone for readers between children's books and the open world of fiction for adults. It tends to deal with topics and themes which are relevant to the target audience. Protagonists are always teenagers. YA fiction is not limited to one specific type of story – love stories, family tragedies, apocalyptic SF, etc. – but instead can cover a very broad range of genres. The pressures, conflicts, joys and **chaos of adolescence** provide a lot of material for any kind of setting or story.

YA fiction for readers aged roughly 12 to 18

This is because YA fiction is not, strictly speaking, a literary genre. It is instead **a marketing and publishing term** designed to identify and target a specific audience. However, all the different kinds of stories and genres now included under the term YA fiction do have some important literary features in common.

Marketing tool

The most important feature common to YA fiction is a focus on **issues relevant to the age group**. The uncertainty, intensity and